ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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35 Cents

The Singing Diamonds — HELEN McCLOY
Blind Date — CORNELL WOOLRICH
? — PHILIP MacDONALD
Accessory After the Fact — SAMUEL HOPKINS ADAMS
Evidence in Camera — MARGERY ALLINGHAM
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The Greuze Girl — FREEMAN WILLS CROFTS
Bridal Pond — ZONA GALE
A Matter of the Tax Payers' Money — VINNIE WILLIAMS
The Lakdoo Dinner — BECHHOFER ROBERTS

OCTOBER

AN ANTHOLOGY OF THE BEST DETECTIVE STORIES, NEW AND OLD

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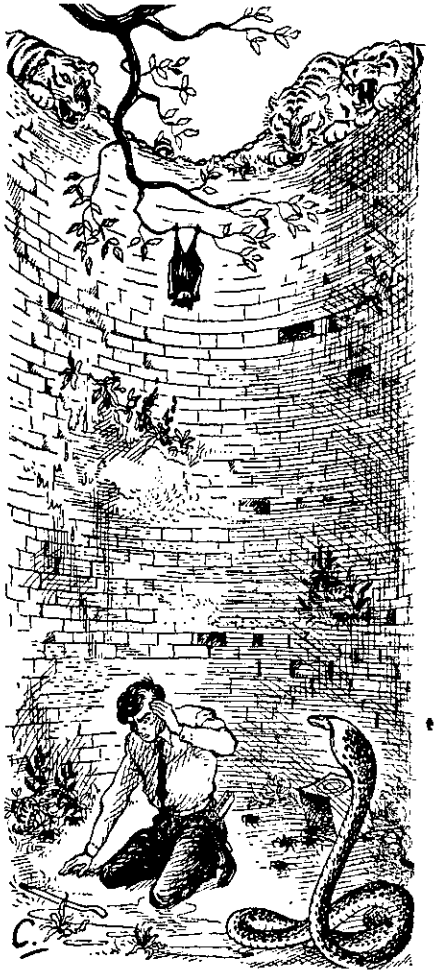
GET HIM OUT OF THIS

by ERNEST DUDLEY



The Pit

When—and if—you have solved Snip Carton's desperate problem, turn to page 75 for the true story of how our hero escaped.

The Problem of the Pit

With the Problem of the Pit, we begin a puzzle series of a new type. Each puzzle consists of a drawing which shows Snip Carton, insurance agent, in a particularly awkward spot; in a situation, in fact, which promises imminent violent death to the hardy investigator unless he—or you—can devise some brilliant method of escape. Along with each drawing appears a brief outline of how Snip Carton came to find himself in such a position, and a summary of all the perils which he must overcome.

• • •

Snip Carton, insurance agent, nabs Black Jack and his notorious gang of jewel thieves red-handed while breaking into Berkeley Manor to steal the Berkeley diamonds. Too late, Snip realizes he has slipped his mouth organ into his pocket in mistake for the sub-machine-gun which he has left at home. This is a dire circumstance indeed, for the gang overpowers Snip, knocks him out, and slings him into a deep, disused pit.

In the pit is a large, ill-tempered cobra escaped from the local zoo. Black Jack also hurls in a box of tarantula spiders, and, seeing that his victim is regaining consciousness, he flings his extra-sized jimmy at him. Snip pretends he has been knocked out again, but the jimmy has merely dazed him.

Then Black Jack remembers that his hated enemy was at one time a champion high-jumper. He orders a henchman—an ex-wild-animal-trainer—to fetch three tigers from the local zoo and chain them around the pit. The gang leaves.

So there's Snip Carton—in a deep pit, a cobra sliding towards him, tarantulas approaching from all sides, and three man-eating tigers glaring down and snarling viciously. To add the macabre touch, a Vampire bat has just flitted onto a twig overhead. What you've got to do is—*Get Him Out Of This!* All the clues are in the picture.

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ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

Invites you to enter its Fifth

$6,000 SHORT STORY CONTEST

(again with the cooperation of Little, Brown & Co., of Boston)

First Prize $2,000

10 ADDITIONAL PRIZES

TOTALING $4,000

Conditions of the Contest

1. Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine offers a cash award of $2,000 as First Prize for the best original detective or crime short story. In addition, EQMM will award five (5) Second Prizes of $500 each, and five (5) Third Prizes of $300 each. All prizes include publication rights in Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, subject to the provisions of paragraph 7. Other acceptable stories will be purchased at EQMM's regular rates.

2. Preferably, stories should not exceed 10,000 words.

3. Awards will be made solely on the basis of merit — that is, quality of writing and originality of plot. The contest is open to everyone except employees of Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, The American Mercury, Inc., and their families. Stories are solicited from amateur as well as professional writers; from beginners as well as old-timers. All will have an equal chance to win the prizes.

4. The judges who will make the final decision in the contest will be Ellery Queen and the editorial staff of Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine.

5. All entries must be received at the office of the magazine, 570 Lexington Avenue, New York 22, N. Y., not later than October 20, 1949.

6. Prize winners will be announced and the prizes awarded by Christmas 1949. The prize-winning stories will appear in Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine during 1950.

7. All prize winners and all other contestants whose stories are purchased agree to grant Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine first book-anthology rights, and when these rights are exercised, they will be paid for as follows: $35 for the original edition, $25 for reprint editions, $25 for British book anthology rights, and a pro rata share of 25% of the royalties if the anthology should be chosen by a book club. Authors of all stories bought through this contest agree to sell non-exclusive foreign rights for $35 per story.

8. Every care will be taken to return unsuitable manuscripts, but Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine cannot accept responsibility for them. Manuscripts should be typed or legibly written, accompanied by a stamped self-addressed envelope, and mailed by first-class mail to:

EQMM $6,000 Detective Short Story Contest
Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine
570 Lexington Avenue, New York 22, N. Y.

You don't need to buy Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine to enter the contest. But if you want it, and should find your newsdealer sold out, use this convenient coupon . . .

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W. Somerset Maugham begins his introductory remarks to "A Writer's Notebook" by making this curious and provocative statement: "I forget who it was who said that every author should keep a notebook, but should take care never to refer to it." We know many authors who religiously maintain commonplace books of ideas, impressions, scraps of dialogue, news clippings, and all the other germs and sperms of literary creation; and so far as we can tell, these authors refer to their notes nearly every time they find themselves in need of "inspiration." True, we know even more authors who do not keep journals of any kind, but without exception these authors are constantly berating themselves for their laziness, and constantly promising to go out and buy a shiny, leather-bound, hand-tooled, gilt-edged notebook and turn over a new leaf.

Speaking for ourselves, we are of the lazy genus. We have no notebooks, and if we had, they would be more apt to contain Daliesque doodling than detectival data. Nevertheless, we are all for notebook discipline — it must be of enormous help in a criminological crisis, compared with the haphazard slovenliness to which we are addicted and on which consequently we must depend. The occasional memoranda we commit to paper are usually indecipherable scrawls on the backs of envelopes, scribblings on the margins of newspapers, notations on menus, timetables, and paper napkins. We once put an important jotting on the back of a ticket-stub, and then placed the stub in the band of our hat — to make sure it wouldn't get lost; but we never found the stub again — perhaps we put it in someone else's hat!

Anyway, Philip MacDonald admits to the notebook habit, and through the years he has accumulated a whole collection of them. Recently he was glancing through a dusty daybook, more than twenty years old, and his eyes lit on a particularly cryptic entry. It was sandwiched between longer notes which, despite their greater detail, meant nothing whatever to him; but that cryptic entry, by some quirk of memory, suggested "a story without a title" *(see pages 5 and 6).*

?

by PHILIP MacDONALD

THIS is a tale of those dear dead days when the world seemed fit to live in . . .

It is the tale of how young Howard Huntoon of Philadelphia (Bingo to his friends and family) paid a visit to Great Britain and collected for himself not only a beautiful wife but the

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foundations of a sizeable fortune.

If anyone had told Bingo, before he sailed, that he would come back with a wife, he would have laughed at the very idea. If anyone had gone on to say that he would marry into the bookmaking business, he would have laughed even louder.

But that, of course, was before he had met Deborah Delancy.

Deborah was the daughter of Robert Delancy — and Robert Delancy, as you will remember if you ever were in England in those merry days, was the man whose impressive picture, over the slogan *ROBBIE ALWAYS PAYS*, you were constantly seeing on the advertising pages.

But you will hear more of Mr. Delancy later — and, as it were, straight from the horse's mouth. So let us return to Deborah, a far more delectable subject than her sire.

Deborah Delancy, at the time of this tale, was not only a darling but was held by cognoscenti to be the third most beautiful female in the British Empire. It is not surprising, therefore, that her impact upon Bingo was immediate and devastating.

They met at the Duchess of Dorset's "Character" Charity Ball — Mme. de Pompadour and Abe Lincoln — and once having set eyes upon each other, remained inseparable throughout the whole coruscating affair.

They had lunch together the next day, and dinner the night after that, and a whole day on the Thames the day after that — so that within a week it became clear to each of them that the prospect of life without the other was not to be borne.

And neither was the prospect of waiting a whole year, until Deborah was twenty-one, any more acceptable.

"But," said Deborah, sadly shaking her lovely head, "there's Father to be reckoned with. And, as you would say, my Sweet, he's going to be tough!"

"He is?" said Bingo. "Why?"

"Because, my Pet," said Deborah, "you haven't what he considers enough money. Also, what money you *have*, you didn't make yourself."

"Oh," said Bingo.

Mr. Robert Delancy, it developed, was not only tough, he was impossible. He heard Bingo out, which didn't take him long, and then launched upon a tirade which was compounded in almost equal proportions of sermon, autobiography, and disparagement, the last being concerned with Bingo in particular and all things American in general.

To poor Bingo, Mr. Delancy, seated behind his vast, shining desk, seemed a singularly repellent barrier across the road to happiness. Mr. Delancy, a self-made man, looked and behaved, as someone had once remarked, very much as if he'd done the construction in the dark, and it was all young Mr. Huntoon could do to refrain from advising him to walk the six blocks to St. James's Park and go jump in the lake.

"It ain't that I'm 'ard-'earted,"

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said Mr. Delancy. "Far from it! If you was a young chap with gumption, now, 'oo wasn't frightened to go out and make y'rself a pound or two by the use of your own so-called brains, it'd be a different matter. But the way it is — well, you can't expect me to sit 'ere and give my countenance to any foreign-born idler, with no more prospects than a — a — than a foreign-born idler, courting my daughter!"

At this point Mr. Delancy slapped the desk-top with his well-fleshed hand.

"So that's it, me lad!" he said. "And in a nutshell!"

Bingo swallowed, and drew a deep breath, and said, with the utmost courtesy, "What do you imagine, Mr. Delancy, that a — uh — foreign-born idler would have to do in order to convert himself into a suitable son-in-law?"

"Now that," said Mr. Delancy, "is a civil question, so I'll give you a civil answer, young man. The day you come in 'ere and show me ten thousand pounds you've made with your own brains — well, that day you can 'ave my permission to pay your attentions to Debby!

"Provided," added Mr. Delancy, "that she still wants 'em. Do I make myself clear?"

"Oh, yes," said Bingo. "Perfectly."

It was at the third of the lovers' clandestine meetings after this distressing interview that Bingo said, "Lookit, honey: what's the lowdown on this racket of your old man's?"

"Lowdown?" said Deborah. "What's that, my Precious?"

Bingo told her, and she said, "Oh, I see. Well, Father's a sort of glorified bookie . . ."

After which, Miss Delancy launched

WIN $100.00

for the best title for this story!

Just fill in your title suggestion on the coupon on page 6 or on a separate sheet of paper. . . . Entries must be in by October 17, 1949, and the prize of $100 will be awarded by October 31, 1949. . . . Entries will be judged on the basis of aptness and effectiveness of title. . . . The winning title will be selected by the editorial staff of Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine and their decision will be accepted as final; in case of a tie duplicate prizes will be awarded. . . . No entries can be returned. . . . This contest is open to everyone except employees of EQMM or The American Mercury, Inc., and their families.

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into a succinct description of her father's business. Mr. (*ROBBIE ALWAYS PAYS*) Delancy was, it seemed, by far the biggest "Off-the-Course" (i.e., bet-by-mail) bookmaker in the British Isles, where the law has always allowed a man to put his money on a horse. The accounts of Mr. Delancy's clients were all established upon a weekly basis, and every Saturday his staff both received and paid out weekly checks, doing, explained Deborah, a great deal more of the former than the latter, which accounted for her father's formidable wealth.

"Hmm!" grunted Bingo when she had finished. "And anyone can open an account?"

"Absolutely anybody," said Deborah decisively. "If they don't pay on the dot, though, the account's cancelled."

Bingo seemed thoughtful. "Tell me," he asked, "how soon before a race does a guy have to mail his bet?"

"Letters," said Deborah, "have to be postmarked the day before. Of course, telegrams and phone-calls —"

"They don't matter," said Bingo, and relapsed into deep scowling reverie.

"What's all the cerebration, my Angel?" asked Deborah fondly.

"I was just thinking," said Bingo slowly, "that it might be nice to make your old man's business put up that ten thousand . . .

"Without him knowing," added Bingo to himself. "Or you either, if it comes to that . . ."

It was three weeks later that a record crowd of race-goers on Epsom Downs saw the fabulous French outsider, Pisan-Thibeau, win the Derby at the astonishing price of a hundred-and-fifty to one.

TITLE CONTEST COUPON

My title for Philip MacDonald's story in the October issue of EQMM is:

_____

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It was a great day for most bookmakers — and Mr. Delancy was jubilant. Out of all his thousands of clients, only one — a newcomer by the odd name of Sam Smiles — had bet on the winner, and although Mr. Smiles had to be sent a very comfortable-sized check, this was a drop in the bucket compared to the total intake.

It was a week later, when Mr. Delancy had already forgotten the race, that he was told one morning by his secretary that an American gentleman, a Mr. Huntoon, was demanding audience.

"Oh, well, show 'im in," said Mr. Delancy — and, two minutes later, was regarding with astonishment a bank-statement which testified that there stood to Mr. Huntoon's credit the sum of ten thousand, five hundred and seventy-two pounds, seven shillings and twopence.

Bingo grinned at Mr. Delancy. "I just went out," he said, "and used my so-called brains . . ."

And he wouldn't say more than that to anyone. Not even to Deborah — until she'd been Mrs. Howard Huntoon for more than forty-eight hours.

And then Bingo said, "Well, here it is, Deb! Remember Sam Smiles, the guy who collected that big bet off your old man?" He tapped his chest. "Alias Howard Huntoon," he said proudly.

"Oh, *Cherub!*" cried Deborah. "But what on earth made you back that outsider?"

"I didn't bet," said Bingo casually, "until after the race."

Mrs. Huntoon reacted in amazement to this remarkable statement.

"Explain, my Lamb!" she said weakly. "At once!"

"I didn't do it with mirrors," said Bingo. "I did it with two envelopes, one a size bigger than the other. I cut the front right-hand top corner — the stamp corner — out of the bigger envelope. I put the smaller envelope inside, seal up the bigger one, and address it to myself. I then put a stamp on *in the usual place* and mail it — the evening *before* the Derby.

"So the next morning, on Derby Day, I receive it — and I take out an *unused* envelope — but stamped and postmarked with yesterday's date!

"After that it's a cinch. I address the envelope to Delancy's office — wait till I've heard the winner on the phone — write Smiles's letter making the bet — put it in the envelope — go around to your father's office — wait till the mailman comes by to deliver the mail — and then drop my letter, with yesterday's postmark, into your father's box the moment the mailman's gone . . ."

"My Imp!" said Mrs. Huntoon in an awed, admiring whisper. "My own Genius!"

It was several years before they told Mr. Delancy. But they did — and today postal deliveries to bookmakers in Britain are made in an entirely different manner.

So don't go getting ideas.

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WINNER OF A SPECIAL AWARD: HELEN McCLOY

Like Q. Patrick, Helen McCloy has won a prize in all four EQMM contests to date — and may she continue to, ad infinitum. The Q. Patrick foursome of stories was distinguished by a remarkable level of quality; Helen McCloy's "Chinoiserie," "The Other Side of the Curtain," "Through a Glass, Darkly," and now, "The Singing Diamonds" rival the Q. Patrick quartet in sheer, all-around excellence . . .

The tale of "The Singing Diamonds" was born in July 1948 when the author followed with great interest the successive news reports of the "flying discs." When Helen McCloy sees something unusual in a newspaper, she generally forgets to cut it out until the paper has become so old that another member of the family has disposed of it in the interests of good housekeeping. But as source material for Helen McCloy the "flying discs" were not to be denied: this time the other member of the family carefully saved the clippings, after Miss McCloy had mentioned their fictional possibilities:

But all that the clippings really gave Miss McCloy was a basic idea. Read consecutively, the "flying disc" reports created more mysteries than they solved. The last two reports in her file were distinctly different in tone and content from the earlier news accounts — a fact which crept into Miss McCloy's final story, as you will see. Also, the so-called scientific explanations — every one of them — contained within themselves their own refutations — just as in Miss McCloy's fictionized version.

The really difficult problem of adapting the "flying discs" to the "singing diamonds" was to invent some reasonably plausible explanation which would cover all the facts and still give the author a satisfactory ending for her story — an explanation, moreover, that would be different from all the other possible theories suggested in the newspaper reports. This was so difficult a problem to solve that more than once Helen McCloy came near casting the idea aside and looking for an entirely different plot idea. But the "flying discs" were not to be denied: Miss McCloy persisted until she had given her psychiatric detective, Dr. Basil Willing, all the clues and deductions he needed.

Do you want a layman's psychiatric explanation for Helen McCloy's persistence? It goes back to her childhood, as so many psychiatric explanations do. Miss McCloy recently came upon an old diary of hers — a childish, misspelled daybook — in which she found this entry, dated November 16th, 1914: "Read and read Sherlock Holmes."

How many of us were doing the same thing at about the same time! Surely the Old Maestro was a persistent man, and many of us learned well under his 'tec tutelage . . .

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THE SINGING DIAMONDS

by HELEN McCLOY

HER name was Mathilde Verworn. She came to Basil Willing's office at the hospital one day in July when Manhattan panted under a sky the hot, throbbing blue of an alcohol flame. Her face was a stolid mask of meat. Where bone structure showed through, it was meagre — buttonhole mouth, knobby nose, small, round eyesockets. It was not the first time Basil had seen an apparently healthy figure in his patient's chair. Agile, wiry types had resilience. It was these solid, unyielding men and women who came to the psychiatrist.

"Dr. Willing, is there such a thing as collective hallucination?" Her speech had a faintly foreign flavor.

"It's never been proved. If two people had precisely the same hallucination it would be as strange as if two people had the same dream."

"What about all those people who saw and heard the Singing Diamonds?"

"Probably malobservation — a different thing. The newspapers called it 'mass hysteria' but hysteria doesn't begin and end with one incident. I'd call it the effect of suggestion on unstable imaginations. Like the Flying Disc scare a year ago. Why do you ask? Were you . . . ?"

"Yes." At last she looked at him directly.

"Surely that isn't why you came to me?"

"No. I came because of what happened . . . afterward. If you followed the newspaper stories you may recall that there were five circumstantial eye-witnesses — MacDonald, Sanders, Flaherty, Dr. Amherst, and Mrs. Kuzak. Counting me, that's six. I never heard of them before. I don't suppose any of them ever heard of me, as my story wasn't printed. But, Dr. Willing, in the last thirteen days four of us six have . . . died." Her eyes fled before his gaze. Her wide face blanched. Even her blood was fleeing . . . "Sanders, Flaherty, Amherst, and Mrs. Kuzak. MacDonald and I seem to be the only ones left. What's going to happen to us?"

"What makes you think these people have died?"

"Think? I know!" She took a bundle of clippings out of her handbag. "I'm one of those who read every page of the morning paper. Even the obituary page."

He spread out the clippings on his desk.

Suddenly at her home in East Orange, N. J., on July 13, Sarah Ann (Sally) beloved wife of Samuel Kuzak and daughter of Prosper and Maria Morelli. Funeral private . . .

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N. Y., July 15

Clarence V. Flaherty, retired police sergeant, formerly attached to the 15th precinct, died suddenly at his home, 93-48 Mimosa Boulevard, Jackson Heights, last night. After dinner Mr. Flaherty, who lived with his widowed mother, went out in his backyard to cool off. When Mrs. Flaherty finished washing the dishes and went out to sit with him, he was dead. Mr. Flaherty will be remembered as the police sergeant who captured two members of the Harsch gang of jewel thieves after a gun battle on Madison Avenue three years ago . . .

SIXTEEN KILLED
IN PLANE CRASH

Charleston, S. C., July 20 —

A Columbia Airlines passenger plane burst into flame shortly after it crashed here tonight killing the pilot, co-pilot, and fourteen passengers. The only survivor was Miss Eleanor Godfrey, airline hostess, thrown out of the plane before fire broke out. "I had just been to the pilots' compartment to ask for help in quieting one of the passengers, a sailor, who had been drinking before he boarded the plane," Miss Godfrey told reporters. "The pilot, Captain Sanders, was at the controls. The co-pilot, Lieutenant Becker, came back with me and talked to the sailor. Then an earthquake seemed to hit the plane and all the lights went out . . ."

Boston, Mass., July 21

The Reverend Dr. Alexander Amherst, rector of the Episcopal Church of the Ascension, was found dead in his bed by a chambermaid this morning at seven when she knocked on his door to wake him. He is survived by a daughter, Mrs. Lawrence Llewellyn. . . .

Basil laid the clippings aside. "What makes you think these were four of the people who saw and heard the Singing Diamonds?"

"But, Dr. Willing, it is so! Look!" Again Mathilde Verworn laid a bundle of clippings on his desk.

SINGING DIAMONDS
BAFFLE SCIENCE

N. Y., July 6 —

Scientists yesterday were unable to explain the alleged Singing Diamonds reported by observers in several states. The A.P. states that Captain F. L. Sanders, ex-Navy pilot now with Columbia Airlines, reports seeing "nine flat, elongated squares, like the pips on a nine of diamonds, flying in V-formation at 1,500 miles an hour, at 10 p.m. last night, six miles north of Chicago. He was alone in a plane flying at 20,000 feet to test a new high octane gas.

The first published account came from Donald MacDonald, rancher of Deep Gulch, Montana. On July 1st at 11:55 p.m. he saw "three objects, bright, flat and diamond-shaped," flying over his ranchhouse at a speed he claims to have calculated exactly as 621 miles an hour. They flew at a great height with a strange resonance like the humming or singing of a high tension wire in the wind.

Dr. Anders Verworn, Professor of

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Astrophysics at Manhattan University, suggested crystallized ice, formed far above the earth's surface, as a possible explanation. "Artificial ice crystals have been made in the laboratory two feet wide," he said. "Natural crystals are only a few thousandths of an inch wide. They are not diamond shaped. They do not make a humming sound. As I said a month ago in my address to the graduating class at McGill University, people who insist on seeing mysteries in nature should be more careful about spreading stories based on insufficient data, inaccurately observed and uncritically analyzed."

Basil looked up. "This Dr. Verworn is your husband?"

"Yes. Anders tells reporters there is no such thing. Then suppose I, his wife, should say I had seen them? It would have been bad for his career. He didn't understand that. He urged me to give my story to the papers. But I knew better. I kept silent. Success means much to my husband. When we married we were fellow students at the University of Vienna and poor, so poor! I gave up my own studies to take care of him. I marketed, cooked, mended, washed — more like a mother than a wife. We saved money to come to America. He worked his way up to a full professorship and got a job as technical adviser to Glueck & Riddle, makers of astronomical instruments. The salary he invested in their stock and became a partner. When another partner sued him once he was so frightened, like a little boy. I told him to put the stock in my name so they couldn't take it away from him and he did. But it was then I first realized how our long struggle had left its mark on him."

Basil went on reading.

ARMY PILOTS SEARCH SKY FOR SINGING DIAMONDS

N. Y., July 7 —

Six P-51s from Mitchell Field with cameras and radar scoured the sky from New York to Poughkeepsie for Singing Diamonds last night without success. A spokesman for Army Air Force Public Relations said: "All these witnesses saw and heard something, but I cannot believe that any foreign power has developed a radio-guided missile that will go 1,500 miles per hour as Singing Diamonds are said to do."

New York's first celestial diamonds appeared yesterday evening when a retired police sergeant, Clarence V. Flaherty, formerly of the 15th precinct, Manhattan, described his view of "twelve, brilliant, fiery objects" flying from north to south above his home in Jackson Heights an hour after sunset. "I heard the humming," he told U.P. "Sweet and shivery like the plucking of harp strings." Mrs. Sally Kuzak, housewife of East Orange, New Jersey, said she saw and heard two of the strange objects above her home yesterday at 4:00 p.m. — their first appearance by daylight. Mrs. Kuzak, trained as an airplane spotter for Civilian Defense during the war, described them as "streamlined diamonds, bright as spun

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aluminum, speeding at 1,000 miles per hour at a height of 30,000 feet with an almost supersonic humming, shriller than an airplane engine." The Reverend Dr. Alexander Amherst of the Church of the Ascension, Boston, Mass., told A.P. he was walking in his garden at Brookline before breakfast this morning when he heard a humming sound "sweet, high, and clear." He looked up and saw a procession of six diamond-shaped objects flash across the sky "bright as silver." He said they crashed on a hillside and he telephoned the local office of the FBI.

Dr. Tamara Radanine, assistant professor of Social Psychology at Manhattan University, told reporters that the whole affair threw a lurid light on the hysterical imagination of the American people, drugged as they are by comic books, radio, movies, and detective stories. "Motivation is obscure," added Dr. Radanine. "But everything is interpreted in terms of personalistic dimensions suggesting widespread ego-involvement and pseudologica phantastica. Like Orson Welles' Martian broadcast, it illustrates their highly consistent structuration of the external stimulus world."

DIAMONDS STILL FLY, EXPERTS SKEPTICAL

N. Y., July 8 —

Though the "Singing Diamonds" contrive to bypass meteorologists, astronomers, and anyone else equipped with a telescope and common sense, they are still blazing and humming before the popeyes of John Q. Public and his gullible missus. Two men coming home from a poker party in Milwaukee at 4 a.m. were rumored to have seen two "Singing Diamonds" in a dog-fight "like a couple of fighter planes." And a rumor alleged that a woman in a Detroit suburb said a "Singing Diamond with hands" came right down out of the sky to slap her in the face. A good reason for NOT seeing "Singing Diamonds" was proffered by Clarence V. Flaherty, first New Yorker to report one: "This kidding is getting pretty hard to take."

A spokesman for the Frelinghuysen Research Corporation told reporters that octagonal sheets of metal which can stand a pull of 200,000 times their own weight before they disintegrate are being exploded daily in an underground workroom there. These objects revolve at 1,200 miles an hour and an untrained observer might mistake an octagon for a lozenge or diamond. The octagonals are never allowed outside the underground workroom, even at night.

A Manchurian report relayed by Reuters states that Ching Fu, a rice exporter's son formerly a student at Leland Stanford, claims to have seen "six brilliant lozenges that flew fast enough to make a singing in my ears" while he was piloting his private plane from Peiping to Shanghai to escape the advancing Communists.

PUBLIC TIRED OF SINGING DIAMONDS

N. Y., July 9 —

"Singing Diamonds" had gone the way of "Flying Discs" and sea serpents

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yesterday when a Chicago jeweler tried to cash in on the mass hysteria by advertising: "Our diamonds don't sing but how they shine!" Billy Brush, the song-writer, has composed a new song that begins: "My heart is a diamond that flies and sings when I see you!" In Philadelphia a toy manufacturer admitted sending aloft dozens of diamond-shaped kites as a publicity stunt in the last few days. Soviet military attaché, Grigori Nyetchkoff, explained the "Singing Diamonds" to reporters by saying: "Either Americans are importing too much vodka or some Russian Paul Bunyan is breaking up the old Imperial crown that was crusted with diamonds." Kurt Verworn, associate professor of Political Economy at Manhattan University, had his own theory: "Just propaganda for war. People are being stirred up so they'll believe some foreign power is testing a new device in preparation for another Pearl Harbor."

"Well, Dr. Willing? Am I right?" demanded Mrs. Verworn. "Didn't four of six people who talked as if they had really seen and heard something they called 'Singing Diamonds' die less than two weeks afterward?"

"Counting Ching Fu and yourself there were seven credible witnesses," amended Basil. "And apparently you've spotted something all the wire services missed — four of the seven have died, apparently three natural deaths and one accident. Why come to me?"

"I have heard that you are a psychiatric consultant of the district attorney's office. I thought you might tell me if these people were killed because they had seen Singing Diamonds and how it was done. It seems the act of a maniac and . . . I want to protect myself, since I saw them, too."

Basil leaned back, studying the frightened eyes in the heavy, unimaginative face. "Tell me what happened when you saw them."

"We live on Morningside Heights in a little house with a garden. We dine late in summer because of daylight saving. My husband will not dine before candlelight, as he calls it. I was alone on a window-seat in the living room waiting for dinner and eating a little candy because I get hungry at the same hour all the year round. It was just after sunset. The air was a lovely blue color like smoke. Suddenly I saw five, bright, diamond-shaped objects pass swiftly across a clear patch of sky between two clouds. All the time I saw them I heard a humming — like the unearthly murmuring when you cover your ear with a seashell. They were larger and brighter than stars. I didn't think much about it then but now — after all these deaths . . . Dr. Willing, what shall I do?"

Basil hesitated, then: "Mrs. Verworn, you'll have to face every possibility however fantastic and disconcerting. There were Japanese who died several weeks after they were exposed to radioactivity from the atomic bomb. If by any chance these deaths were caused by some new form

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of radiation, I can't help you. We don't know enough about the effects of radiation yet. It seems more likely that you and the other witnesses saw some device no one was supposed to see — a military or trade secret, which you had not the technical knowledge to recognize for what it was. Of course you might describe it eventually to someone equipped to recognize it from your description and the owners of the secret, reading the newspaper accounts, would realize that possibility. If they were sufficiently criminal and their secret sufficiently important, it's not entirely inconceivable that they might arrange to liquidate the involuntary eye-witnesses before they talked too much. They could get the names from the newspapers."

Her relief was enormous, pathetic. "Then I am safe? I did not give my story to the newspapers! These people cannot know my name!"

"Did you give your story to anyone else besides your husband?"

"I told Kurt and —"

"I was going to ask you about Kurt Verworn. A relative?"

"Our adopted son. Like many immigrants we had cousins who came to America a generation earlier. After Anders made his success here we looked them up. We found a family living on an Ohio farm and adopted the son. He is twenty-eight now, but — more like a guest than a son. Born in this country, all his ideas are American — even his manners or lack of manners. I also told Tamara Radanine, a young Russian-American who teaches at the University. She was mentioned in one of those clippings, too. Reporters always telephone University people when something inexplicable occurs. Like the reporters, I thought Tamara might be able to explain the Singing Diamonds because she is a psychologist. The only other person I told was Clare Albany."

"Any particular reason for telling her?"

"She is a member of the Fortian Society. They make a hobby of collecting strange happenings. Clare, like the others, promised not to tell anyone else."

Basil summed up: "Then any harm that comes to you as a consequence of your seeing the Singing Diamonds must come from one of these four since no one else knows you saw them."

"Harm to me? From my husband, my son, and my two best friends among women? Impossible, Dr. Willing!"

"I should like to meet these four without their knowing why I wish to meet them."

"Clare is coming to dinner tonight. Anders and Kurt will be there. I could invite Tamara. If you would come, too?"

"I shall be delighted. Meanwhile, stay with crowds until dinner time. Each person who died was alone at the moment of death . . ."

That afternoon, in a little office on Pine Street, Basil showed Mathilde's

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clippings to his former commanding officer, Admiral Custis Laidlaw of Naval Intelligence. He reached for a telephone, asked for "File 29-B." When it came, he selected two clippings and handed them to Basil.

Wilkens County Chronicle
Deep Gulch, July 13
We regret to announce the sudden death of our respected fellow citizen Donald MacDonald, proprietor of the Three Star Ranch thirty miles south of Deep Gulch. Mr. MacDonald, who lived alone with two cowhands, was found dead early this morning at the entrance of his corral by one of the hands — Josiah Horton. He and the other hand, Arthur Drake, said that the death must have occurred while they were still asleep in their bunkhouse . . .

San Francisco Journal
S. F., July 10 —
Memorial services will be held today at the Bhuddist Temple of the Golden Lotus for Ching Fu, nephew of Ching Sheng, of this city. The nephew was killed in an airplane crash in China two days ago . . .

"We're jittery about surprises from the air," said Laidlaw. "Subconscious memories of Pearl Harbor and Hiroshima. Unfortunately, Army Air Force failed to keep its search for the Singing Diamonds secret. A new and shiny lieutenant in Public Relations spilled the beans. *I cannot believe that any foreign power has developed a radio-guided missile that will go 1,500 miles per hour* — could the fool have put it more plainly?"

Basil grinned. "He might have mentioned the initial of the foreign power's name."

"About as smart as shouting 'Fire!' in a crowded theatre. I'm happy to say that young man is now stationed on a lonely Pacific island, and Naval Intelligence has taken over. Pretext: Sanders, a Navy Reserve pilot. These clippings are a lesson in the manufacture of public opinion. The first stories are skeptical but open-minded. In the last two, after we took over, what a difference! The words Singing Diamonds are always printed in quotation marks. Nice touch, that. The 'reports' have become 'rumors' overnight. The most improbable are chosen for publication. Other witnesses are discouraged by Flaherty's complaint about 'kidding,' and John Q. Public is reminded that most modern mysteries are advertising gags. Hasn't a toy manufacturer 'admitted' — another nice word, implying accusation — that he sent up diamond kites?"

"Did he?"

"There was no toy manufacturer. Billy Brush did write that song — at my suggestion."

"You might have done better with your scientific stuff," ventured Basil. "The story on the octagonals at the Frelinghuysen laboratories is spoiled by the last sentence, saying the octagonals are never let out of the workroom, even at night."

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"You just can't teach scientists to slant things for propaganda purposes!" complained Laidlaw. "The Wave who mimeographed their report for press release was told to omit that last sentence. She forgot."

"What Pacific island is she on now?"

Laidlaw laughed. "She's still here. The Navy is always gallant even to its own women. And it was no worse than the stuff the scientists themselves were putting out, Verworn and Radinine. Anyway we made Singing Diamonds ridiculous so the public would forget and no foreign power would guess we were interested. Then this Russian, Nyetchkoff, talks to reporters and he jokes about it, too. That didn't make us happy. Was he as anxious to discourage public interest as we were?"

"Of course it was you who kept the wire services from picking up those six deaths," said Basil. "Did you get any information about them?"

"A little. We looked for some connection with . . . a foreign power. There wasn't any. Then we looked for some personal connections among the people who had died. Nothing there, though come to think of it now, MacDonald went to Manhattan University fifteen years ago. Must have been about the same year as Kurt Verworn, but there were seventy-three students in the class and there was no mention of Kurt Verworn in MacDonald's papers. Finally, we looked for something — anything — which these six people, apparently so various and scattered, had in common. There were just two things. First, all those who died had asthma, except the pilot, Sanders, and — this is a curious detail — he had a *fiancée* who had asthma. Second: three of the six — Amherst, MacDonald, and Mrs. Kuzak — had a box of candied ginger in the house."

"Any autopsies?"

"Sanders and Ching Fu were burned in the plane crashes. MacDonald and Mrs. Kuzak were cremated before we got to them. Mrs. Flaherty and Amherst's daughter agreed to autopsies. We found nothing."

"What did you look for?"

"Radiation burns. Apparently Flaherty and Amherst died from the effect of chronic asthma on the heart. We examined the wreckage of Sanders' plane and the hillside where Amherst said Singing Diamonds had crashed. No soap. The airport was in radio-telephone communication with Sanders two minutes before the crash. Their records report the conversation."

Basil read the slip of paper Laidlaw took from the file. *Sanders speaking. Coming down in 40 minutes and — Listen, Jim! Something bad is going to happen. I'm losing control and — God! the Singing Diamonds!*

"Anyone else on that plane report Singing Diamonds?"

"Only the hostess survived. She was too busy quieting that drunken sailor to notice anything else. We asked her if the sailor could have

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been faking drunkenness — a plant to get the co-pilot away from Sanders. She wasn't sure. Every lead we followed was a blind alley. Even Flaherty and the Harsch gang. Every member of the gang is now in Sing Sing."

Basil rose to go. "It seems a pretty coldblooded business. Exterminating everyone who saw and heard Singing Diamonds."

"War is a coldblooded business."

"If it is war . . . Have you no other theory?"

Laidlaw smiled. "Rather believe in voyagers from outer space? If that's it, Naval Intelligence is going to seem very provincial, interpreting everything that happens in terms of this planet and its miniscule wars . . ."

"What Dr. Tamara Radanine would call 'consistent structuration of the external stimulus world.' "

"Who? Oh, the she-psychologist. We asked her for some dope on this and she gave us the usual hooey."

"Then this is what it boils down to: Science fiction or E. Phillips Oppenheim?"

"What do you think?"

"I have glimmerings of a third explanation that would cover all the facts."

"Even Ching Fu?"

Basil weighed the question. "Yes, even Ching Fu. The Chinese are fond of ginger . . ."

The Verworns' living room overlooked a yard cunningly planted to increase the sense of space. A half-moon of close-cropped turf at the center, its chord the house wall. Along its curve the neat grass gave way to a tangle of flowering shrubs and trees. On one side was a vacant lot without any wall. There the tangle of cultivated shrubs had been infiltrated by wind-blown weeds so that the garden blended almost imperceptibly with the wasteland beyond.

Mathilde welcomed Basil warmly and introduced her husband — a slender, brown man with an ancient Roman face — predatory nose, narrow lips, watchful eyes. His bow was Continental. Basil almost caught a ghostly clicking of heels.

After he had acquired a cocktail, he sat on the window-seat beside a girl in plain black with a string of crystal beads. Her brown hair was braided, wound around her head. Her gray eyes were speculative. "What do you think of the academic world?" she asked abruptly.

"Is this the academic world?"

"A cross-section." Merriment glinted in her eyes. "A full professor of astro-physics, Anders Verworn, and an associate professor of political economy, Kurt Verworn. Even I am a humble assistant professor of social psychology. My name is Tamara Radanine."

"What about Mrs. Albany?" Basil asked.

"Clare? She is a mystery."

Clare Albany's figure was small and well proportioned, her flesh still firm and slenderly rounded. Platinum

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rinse made the smooth scrolls of hair a uniform silver. The brilliant petunia-pink of lips and nails drew the eye away from wrinkles in her cheeks, veins on the backs of her hands. Her dress was a distracting fantasy of hyacinth lace. In either ear she wore an enormous star ruby. Against all this paleness her eyes stood out — dark, lustrous, passionate.

"She says she is the widow of a shoe manufacturer," Tamara was saying. "His lungs were bad and they had to live in Arizona. When he died she came to New York and took an apartment on Park Avenue. That was a year ago."

"Nothing very mysterious there."

"No? Then perhaps you can tell me why a woman like that — a woman of the restaurant, theatre, and night club world — wants to make friends with people like us, scholars and hermits?"

"She is a friend of yours?"

A little color came into the lean cheeks of Dr. Radanine. "You think I'm dreadful to talk this way about my hostess and my fellow guest, but it's my occupational disease — social psychology."

"As your accomplice, I have no right to object. I'm interested for several reasons. And you make it interesting. I'm surprised at that."

"Why?"

"I read an interview with Dr. Tamara Radanine about the Singing Diamonds."

"Oh, that!" She laughed. "Isn't 'consistent structuration of the external stimulus world' a beautiful phrase?"

"I like 'pseudologica phantastica' better."

"Some boy in Navy Public Relations asked me for a statement. I gave him the sort of dope they expect from a professor. Clare was furious. She's a Fortian."

"Did you meet her through the Verworns?"

"I forget where I first met her. She enrolled in the summer school when she first came to New York, and soon she knew everyone on the faculty. That is, everyone she considered worth cultivating. Everyone she takes trouble with is selected for some particular reason."

"What's the reason here?"

"It could be Mathilde. She's so respectable and in some subtle way Clare wouldn't be quite respectable unless she had someone like Mathilde along. Or it could be Kurt. He's the kind of man Clare would like to marry. His book — *What Inflation Means To You* — was a bestseller."

"Perhaps he will be the lucky man."

"I think not."

"Any particular reason?"

"Only one. Kurt is engaged to marry me."

Basil took another look at the young man, tall, angular, loose-jointed with a shock of sandy hair. His speech was almost aggressively American and Middlewestern. Basil recalled Mathilde's complaint. *His ideas are American, even his manners or lack of manners . . .*

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Double doors were sliding back. A maid appeared in the doorway to announce dinner. Beyond her a long table laid with glass and silver glittered like ice in the candlelight. Basil was placed on his hostess' right, with Tamara on the other side, Clare and Kurt opposite. His start was almost guilty when Clare's light, rapid voice lanced across the table: "What were you two talking about so quietly on your window seat?"

He responded swiftly: "The Singing Diamonds."

There was a sudden hush — the hush that follows a blunder. Basil went on: "All the explanations offered at the time were ingenious, yet none were true for there was one fact that none of them took into account. The fact that everyone of the six coherent witnesses who saw and heard Singing Diamonds died a few days afterward."

This time the hush was more pronounced. Anders Verworn spoke ponderously. "You do not make that statement without factual basis?"

"I can prove it." Basil took Mathilde's clippings from his breast pocket. Briefly he gave them the facts. "All but Sanders were subject to asthma," he concluded. "And, rather curiously, Sanders had an asthmatic *fiancée.* Three of the six had a box of candied ginger in the house, at the time. Incidentally, three of you were among those who gave the press conflicting explanations of the Singing Diamonds. I'd like to know what you think now."

Again Anders took the floor as if he were spokesman for the whole company. "Dr. Willing, you cannot realize how shocking your revelation is to the rest of us at this table. Everyone present has promised my wife not to discuss the matter but . . . My dear, you will release us now, will you not?"

"Yes, of course, Anders." Mathilde's voice was quaking a little as she spoke.

"Briefly, Dr. Willing, my wife was one of those who saw or thought she saw the Singing Diamonds, though her story was not published. You will observe . . ." His voice sharpened. ". . . that she is very much alive."

"But . . ." Clare's voice was a little shrill. "Mathilde has asthma and she likes candied ginger."

"Absurd!" put in Kurt. "Just coincidence, all of it."

Tamara lifted one slanting brow, eloquently quizzical. "Kurt, my darling, and you a political economist with some knowledge of statistics and mathematical probability! Mathilde, if I were you, I should ask for police protection."

"I am not afraid." Mathilde spoke with dignity. "Dr. Willing is a criminologist as well as a distinguished psychiatrist."

"Are you serious?" Kurt was studying the clippings. He took out a small notebook and a tiny gold pencil, scribbled a moment, then tore a page loose and tossed it across the table to Basil.

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Deaths

Ching Fu — China — July 10
MacDonald — Montana — July 12
Mrs. Kuzak — New Jersey — July 13
Flaherty — Jackson Heights — July 14
Sanders — South Carolina — July 20
Amherst — Boston — July 21

"I cannot believe in a murderer who travels so far and so fast!" protested Kurt.

Tamara was looking over Basil's shoulder at the timetable. "If he had a plane it would be almost possible physically — all but the hop from China to Montana. Of course it wouldn't be psychologically possible to combine such fast travel with so many successful killings. No one could stand the strain."

"If there were more than one killer . . ." Kurt was thinking aloud. "In other words, a world-wide criminal organization . . ."

"That also is psychologically absurd," retorted Tamara. "Oh, I know there are criminal organizations of political fanatics but they kill politicians like Jean Jaures and Carlo Tresca. They don't bother with Loch Ness monsters or Singing Diamonds."

"I'm sure some people would do anything!" Clare fingered the cluster of rubies and diamonds on her left hand as if she expected "some people" to snatch it at any moment.

"That would be a job for Military Intelligence or the FBI," said Anders. "No individual could solve such a case. You'd have to travel all over the country, question dozens of witnesses."

"I wonder if it couldn't be done more . . . academically?" suggested Basil. "By us, here, tonight. We have the main details of the six deaths from these clippings. We have also the one surviving eye-witness of Singing Diamonds, Mrs. Verworn, her family, and her closest friends. We are all used to solving problems intellectually. Perhaps we might arrive at the truth if we pooled our wits and our specialized knowledge. Suppose we try."

Tamara laughed. "Once you identify your criminal or criminals will you catch them by such purely cerebral methods?"

"Why not? You should know, Dr. Radanine, how the guilty mind cracks under psychological pressure. Physical violence excites resistance, but once you get hold of a man by his mind, you really have him."

"I should know? Why?"

"As a psychologist. Suppose we each volunteer a new solution of the Singing Diamonds based on these new facts. Dr. Verworn, will you begin?"

"This is fantastic!" Verworn frowned. "However . . . let us go into the garden for our coffee and then . . ."

In the starlit garden, as they sat waiting for the maid to bring coffee, Anders began. "The Singing Diamonds were not radiosondes, used to test air currents, for they must drift with the wind and these other things flew in formation. They were not planes because the one competent

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judge of velocity, Sanders, the pilot, said they flew at 1,500 miles per hour and even the thousand-mile-an-hour plane is still an engineer's dream. What could fly in formation at such an impossible speed? I can think of only one thing — a radio-guided missile, fueled by atomic energy, sent here by a hostile foreign power to intimidate us. Radio-activity might kill the eye-witnesses a few days later."

Basil's gaze shifted. "Mrs. Albany?"

"Isn't it just barely conceivable that it was not a foreign power that sent these things but somebody on another planet, Mars or Saturn? Anders, you told me that since radar was invented they've been able to pick up noises that come from outside the earth's atmosphere. Poor old Pythagoras was right. There is a music of the spheres, only it's modern music — just noise. Didn't they use to believe there was something between the stars that would carry light, but not sound? Something they decided to call ether? I don't know whether you need air for sound to travel through or not, but if you do — why, then there's air between us and the other stars and anything that can go through air might come here from another planet — even radio-guided missiles!"

Basil turned to Kurt. "Your explanation?"

"Father's probably right about radio-guided missiles but aren't we the only country that knows enough to experiment with atomic fission on a big scale right now? Why drag in Mars or a foreign power? I say this thing was a secret experiment of our own technicians that got out of hand. They didn't expect anyone to die. They're sorry as hell, but — there's nothing they can do now. So they're keeping mum and minimizing the Singing Diamonds as 'mass hysteria.' It was a military experiment because — "

Basil interrupted. "Dr. Radanine?"

Again that flippant brow arched in quizzical disagreement. "You've all forgotten one thing. None of these missiles landed anywhere. No explosions, no fragments. A missile has to land. The law of gravity is still operating, I believe. Singing Diamonds were supposed to have crashed near Dr. Amherst's home. Dr. Willing tells us nothing was found there or near the wreckage of Sanders' plane after he sent that radio-telephone message about Singing Diamonds."

She took out a cigarette case. Basil was the first to provide a light. "Thank you." Her crystal beads winked in the brief flame. "All three of you chose the same explanation," she went on. "The objective explanation. You take into consideration such things as velocity, flying formation, sidereal noises picked up by radar, even the political situation! That is natural, scientific, and American. It is also silly.

"Dr. Willing, you laughed at my phrase 'consistent structuration of the external stimulus world.' It may be clumsy but it is true. When T. E.

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Lawrence made a plain sketch of an Arab chieftain, not one of his men could recognize him. Only one ventured an opinion and he said the foot might be a fig-tree. Mohammedans have lost all pictorial sense because Mohamet forebade pictures long ago. In other words, nine-tenths of your so-called reality is confected by your own eyes and your own brain. Occasionally they confect things that aren't there at all. That is called hallucination. It can be collective. Years ago everyone in a whole village of illiterate Russian peasants believed he was smelling roses in winter, when there were no roses. You see?

"Therefore I suggest the subjective explanation — malobservation abetted by imagination. If you look fixedly at the sky about a mile away you see objects in the air — usually dots or circles. They are supposed to be red corpuscles passing across the retina. That is enough stimulus for an active imagination fed on newspaper stories of Singing Diamonds. Since asthma is an allergy, a symptom of an unstable nervous system, it may be asthmatics are more susceptible to this sort of thing than others. The first witness saw the spots as diamonds because diamonds had some subconscious association for him. Once that case was published the others would see the same thing — unconscious mimicry, like the homicidal maniac who imitates the murder method of another case just reported in the press. Shock and fear might account for the two plane accidents. The others died because their asthma was severe enough to affect the heart in a state of shock."

"Very neat, Dr. Radanine," said Basil. "I am glad someone else brought up the subjective explanation. But you've forgotten three points I consider vital — the candied ginger, the fact that not Sanders but his *fiancée* had asthma, and the fact that MacDonald, the first witness, estimated the speed of the Singing Diamonds at 621 miles an hour."

Mathilde's hands were busy with the coffee service which the maid had just brought. "Your explanation, Dr. Willing?"

"I propose an experiment," he answered. "I propose to arrange things so that every one of us shall see and hear Singing Diamonds in a few moments."

Basil strolled across the lawn to the spot where weeds from the vacant lot had infiltrated the shrubbery. He plucked two flowers and came back to the coffee table. Every eye was on him as he stripped a trumpet flower of white petals down to a sort of pod and took out the seeds.

"What an unpleasant odor!" said Clare, fastidiously.

"The taste is not so noticeable in coffee." His tone was casual. "Or in candied ginger."

Clare gasped. "Are you going to put seeds in our coffee?"

"Why not? Mrs. Verworn, will you be good enough to pour?"

Mathilde's hand shook as she lifted the silver pot, but she obeyed. The

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wondering maid was well-trained. She passed the cups without a word.

Tamara turned to Basil. "I am not a botanist. What is this?"

"Jimson weed. A corruption of Jamestown weed. Years ago little country boys were paid to collect it by patent-medicine firms."

Kurt leaned toward him. "Then Tamara was right? The thing is subjective, hallucination induced by a drug in the candied ginger? But who chose Ching Fu, MacDonald, Flaherty, Sanders, Mrs. Kuzak, and my stepmother? Why was it done? And how? No drug will produce the same hallucination in various people!"

"Sure?" Basil looked at him. "Why not drink and find out?"

Anders spoke hoarsely. "Dr. Willing, have you forgotten these other people . . . died?"

"I have not forgotten." Basil met his gaze levelly. "Mrs. Albany, why are you hesitating?"

Clare Albany's dark eyes burned as she lifted the cup to her lips.

"Clare!" Anders' arm shot out, dashing the cup to the ground. It struck a leg of the metal table, and sang as it splintered. Clare gasped as the hot coffee stung her knee.

Anders stood over Basil, eyes blind with rage. "You devil! How did you know?" Anders crouched, clasping Clare's hands as they lay in her scalded lap. "When it's all over, Clare, I want you to remember: I did it for you. That horrible old woman wouldn't let me go. I married her when I was young, inexperienced. She took over my whole life, managing me — 'mothering' me, she called it. When she let herself get old and fat and stupid, she held me by appealing to my pity and gratitude — the shabbiest weapons a woman can use. I couldn't divorce her. She had tricked me into putting my money in her name long ago. Another way of chaining me if ever pity and gratitude should fail — as they did when I met you. I had to smash that cup. I couldn't take the chance that Willing seemed ready to take — the chance that it was not a lethal dose . . ."

Clare Albany was sobbing. Mathilde sat still as a dead woman.

Later that evening Basil talked to Kurt Verworn and Tamara Radanine.

"Suppose you wish to kill someone, but your motive is so obvious that if your victim dies mysteriously you are sure to be suspected. You can't risk buying poison. Jimson weed grows in your backyard. As stramonium, it is burned and inhaled by asthmatics. Your victim is asthmatic, so stramonium in her body would not excite suspicion. But unfortunately it is notorious for causing hallucinations and that might rouse suspicion. As datura, it is used traditionally by faithless Hindu wives who give it to husbands, then entertain lovers before their eyes. The husband waking in a dazed state from hallucinations more vivid than any induced by opium has no idea what he saw or didn't see. You feel sure a death preceded by hallucinations will be suspect.

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"Just then your telephone rings. You are a professor of astro-physics. Reporters call you whenever there is something unexplained in the skies, this time to ask you about Flying Discs. . . . It was then that the Singing Diamonds were born.

"What is the best way to hide a valuable pearl? Put it with a hundred other pearls less valuable. What is the best way to hide the murder of someone you have a strong motive for killing? Put it among a dozen other deaths of people whom you have no motive for killing. How lump all these deaths together? By having each preceded by the same hallucination. That would suggest an inhuman agency — a freak of nature or, at worst, a homicidal maniac. Is there any way you can create such an epidemic of hallucinations?

"First, you need a list of people who have no personal contact with you at all. That's easy. Have you never received an advertisement in the mail and wondered how the company got your name and address? Direct mail advertising is big business nowadays. For ten dollars you can buy a few thousand unclassified names. For a hundred dollars or more, you can buy a list of names classified by age, sex, occupation, incomes, tastes, and habits. Lists of people with chronic asthma are prepared for patent-medicine companies — names and addresses sneaked out of hospital and pharmaceutical records.

"You are a mathematician — an astro-physicist, so you are using the law of averages. If you send an attractive-looking box of candied ginger anonymously to several hundred people, there will be at least five or six who will like candy and who will assume the ginger is either a gift from some friend who forgot to enclose his card or a gift sample from some confectioner who wishes to enlarge his trade. You can afford to go slow. You can buy a few boxes every day and you can mail a few every day at several of the substation post offices in the midtown commercial section where hundreds of packages are mailed every day and there is always a long line at the parcel window. No one will notice or remember you. None of your five or six random victims will have reason to suspect poison. Probably each leads a dull, respectable life with no enemies, so each will eat some of the candy you have doctored with datura seeds. The result depends on how much is eaten at one time — another element of chance that will confuse the trail back to you. Some will just have hallucinations. Others will have hallucinations followed by death. The candy is packed in layers with waxed paper between. In the first layer each piece contains enough datura to create illusions without killing, unless the victim is greedy enough to eat many pieces at one time. In the second layer each piece contains a lethal dose. In that way there are sure to be some among your victims who will suffer optical delusions first and die a few days later.

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"If death is not attributed to the apparent agency of the hallucinations, it will be attributed to the effect of chronic asthma on the heart or to the inhalation of too much stramonium — since that is a remedy for asthmatic spasms.

"You still have two more details to work out — important details. In order to repeat the Flying Disc scare your victims must all see the same hallucination and it must be published in the newspapers. Asthmatics are nervous, susceptible to suggestion. So are people under the influence of a drug. And the Flying Disc scare showed the contagion of an illusion even among normal people. All the murderer needed to do was to plant his suggestion in newspapers.

"Apparently you have forgotten, Mr. Verworn, but Donald MacDonald was a classmate of yours fifteen years ago. Your stepfather looked over alumni records and selected MacDonald for two reasons. He lived alone with two cowhands who would not know your stepfather by sight. He had majored in psychology but economic necessity had made him a rancher in Montana — just as the young man who sets out to be an artist or a poet so often ends as a grocer or a stockbroker. MacDonald was just the man who would be flattered and delighted to participate in what your stepfather must have described to him as 'a little psychological experiment' to test the contagion of mass delusions. As an astro-physicist he wished to discover how reliable the layman is in reporting celestial phenomona. Or so he would tell MacDonald.

"Your stepfather had an excuse to go to Canada — he was invited to speak at the graduation exercises at McGill. He went alone — so he could drive across the Border to Montana alone and see MacDonald without anyone else knowing about it. MacDonald was sworn to secrecy. He promised to give a fake story — in apparent good faith — to the nearest newspaper that subscribed to a wire service. A story sufficiently startling to be picked up by that wire service as a sequel to the Flying Discs. Your stepfather gave him precise instructions about the Singing Diamonds — their supernormal speed, their dazzling brightness, their humming sound — all similar to the natural effects of the exaltation which is the first symptom of stramonium poisoning. There was no letter or telephone call to incriminate Anders Verworn. MacDonald himself would not mention the visit. That might spoil the 'psychological experiment.'

"Before Anders left he promised to send MacDonald a box of candied ginger. And he did send such a box, each piece loaded with a lethal dose of datura, as soon as MacDonald had planted the story so he would never be able to talk about it afterward.

"Once the thing was started, it snowballed. Six of the several hundred victims Anders Verworn had chosen at random were sure they had seen and heard Singing Diamonds —

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while under the influence, mind you, of the drug without knowing it. Dozens of other unbalanced, suggestible minds were equally sure they had seen and heard Singing Diamonds without any drug at all. In one case a victim gave her box of ginger to her *fiancée*, a pilot, and in his drugged state he crashed a passenger plane . . .

"But Anders Verworn made two slips.

"It is said that a man always reverts to the language of his birth at three times — when he prays, when he makes love, and when he counts or does a mathematical problem. When Anders gave instructions to MacDonald, Anders was fearful and excited. So, in calculating the alleged speed of the Singing Diamonds, he gave it to MacDonald as a thousand kilometres an hour instead of a thousand miles an hour. MacDonald realized that the word 'kilometre' would rouse suspicion coming from him, so he attempted to translate the velocity into miles. He was stupid enough to translate it literally as "621 miles per hour." When I saw that figure — 621 — I suspected the story had been planted through MacDonald by a foreigner who thought in kilometres, and I was pretty sure that foreigner was not a Russian, since a thousand Russian versts equals 662.9 miles, not 621.3. For a while my suspicion was evenly divided between you, Mr. Verworn, and your stepfather. Then it settled on him because of his second slip.

"His whole scheme was based on the assumption that his wife would give her story of the Singing Diamonds to the newspapers — so that her death would be one among many that were preceded by hallucinations. But she did not give her story to the papers because she was afraid it would damage her husband's reputation as an astro-physicist. This bothered him so much that he urged her to talk to reporters. She came to me instead and happened to mention that he had urged her to talk to reporters about it. A man of his training, profession, and published views on the Singing Diamonds should have been opposed most violently to the idea of his wife giving such a story to the press. Naturally I asked myself why he had taken the precisely opposite position — and I began to suspect him.

"Then, when I came here this evening and saw he had access to jimson weed in his own yard, it was a simple matter of association — jimson weed — datura — stramonium — candied ginger — asthma — hallucination — Singing Diamonds. The contrast between a simple housewife like Mrs. Verworn and the beautiful Mrs. Albany supplies an obvious motive. And I knew Mrs. Albany would be the first to drink the coffee after I pretended to drug it. A woman who dresses like that at her age is obviously an exhibitionist. She would drink the coffee before anyone else out of sheer bravado. And I suspected that would put tremendous pressure on Anders Verworn — psychological pressure he could not possibly resist."

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ACCESSORY AFTER THE FACT

by SAMUEL HOPKINS ADAMS

IT WAS the most open-and-shut case in my police experience. We had everything — corpse, motive, murderer, and a man on the spot at the time. And what was the result? A complete washout.

You remember the West Sixteenth tenement murder last fall, the one the newspapers headlined as the Millionaire Beggar Mystery. I figured on being in those headlines myself. Detective Casey Lane Solves Millionaire Beggar Mystery. And look at me now! I might as well give my badge to Aunt Minnie.

Old Hans Gommer wasn't any millionaire. But he'd made enough out of forty years' street begging to own the tenement. He kept it up decently, too; otherwise Marian and I wouldn't be living there. His room was at the stairhead, second floor, same floor as our apartment. It was a single room. And I mean single; not even a toilet; just a stove, a bed, a stand, a couple of chairs, and a few cooking gadgets. The windows were barred with fixed half-inch iron, five inches apart. The old miser was jittery about being robbed. His door was like a bank vault's.

He hadn't a friend in the world, unless you count a big snarly brindled tomcat that used to crawl the narrow ledge along the wall, squeeze through the bars, and beg for what was left of dinner, and little enough of that, I guess. Old Hans had a relative, though, an ugly little wizened devil of fifty or sixty — you couldn't tell — who used to come in two or three times a week for an unfriendly game of backgammon. His name was Finney, and we found out afterward he was a disbarred lawyer from somewhere out West. When the door was open in summer, you could hear the pair of 'em growling and cursing and swapping charges of crooked play. True, too, I wouldn't wonder.

The door wasn't open this Monday evening. It was cold and rainy. My wife had been busy all day organizing a floor-by-floor bond campaign with a barrier across the foot of the stairs so no tenant could get past without buying. She and Ma Sanderson were on guard from five o'clock on. At half-past, old Gommer went out and came back with a flounder tied up in paper, to cook for his dinner, and Marian sold him a twenty-five-cent stamp. That was his limit. An hour later Peter Finney, the nephew, knocked on the door and was let in earlier than he usually came, though if he expected to get a meal out of it, he was a fool.

Maybe they quarreled over that. Maybe over the game. Anyway,

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Finney stabbed Hans expertly through the spinal cord, and what happened in the next three hours the Police Department is still arguing. All but me.

Don't forget that all this time either my wife or Ma Sanderson, or both, were on the barrier looking right up to old Gommer's door. Even a cockroach couldn't have got in or out without being spotted.

It was half-past nine and I was smoking my pipe and jollying with the two females at the foot of the stairs when Finney showed up above us.

"Uncle Hans is dead," he said. He was white but cool enough.

The door hadn't sprung shut. We all ran up and went in. The old boy was dead all right, with a neat hole in the back of his neck, so small you could hardly see it through the fuzz of gray hair. He was in his chair, half slumped over the table. The checkers and dice were scattered over the floor. I put it to Finney.

"Who did it?"

"I don't know."

"Why don't you know? You've been here all the time."

You never saw a fishier eye than the one he gave me. "I was asleep," he said.

I turned to the two women. "Could anyone else have got in here since this man came?"

"No." Both spoke at once.

"Could anyone have got out?"

"Absolutely not," Ma Sanderson answered. But my wife qualified with, "Unless those window bars are movable."

I tried them. They were solid.

"I guess that puts it up to you," I told Finney. "Where's the knife?"

"I don't know."

Well, I ought to have called Headquarters, but I figured that, being Johnny-on-the-spot, here was my chance of glory.

"I saw old Gommer having one of these narrow-bladed little fish knives ground by a street grinder one day," Ma Sanderson put in.

"That's it," I said. "We'll find it."

First I frisked Finney. He hadn't so much as a penknife on him. Then the three of us fine-tooth-combed the room. Not a sticker of any sort. That left the window as the only answer. Fifteen feet opposite was a blank wall. Far as it could be thrown, the knife would have to drop into the little backyard. I gave Marian my gun to guard Finney and went down with my flash. No knife. And no footprints in the soft ground, proving that nobody had happened by and picked up the knife.

"It's *got* to be in this room," I said.

So I went through Finney again and the three of us turned the place inside out and made a detailed inventory of everything in it. It was then that my wife said:

"I wish Aunt Minnie was here."

Aunt Minnie was her old schoolmarm at No. 18, now living on the top floor of our tenement. But she was on a visit.

"You can have Aunt Minnie," I

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said. "I'll take Headquarters." So I phoned.

Then I went after Finney again.

"You killed him."

"I did not. What would I want to kill him for?"

"You're his heir, aren't you?" Marian said.

"I guess so. But I didn't kill him."

"Now, listen," I said. "You got into a stink over your game of backgammon and maybe he made a crack about you cheating and you let him have it. If you didn't, who did?"

"That's for you to find out," he said.

Then the Headquarters push came in and did everything over again with the same result. They took Finney with them when they quit, leaving us with only one new fact: the old man had probably been dead about three hours. So he must have been killed shortly after Finney arrived — which got us a lot nearer nothing.

"I *do* wish Aunt Minnie was here," my wife said.

"What would she do that we haven't?" I growled.

"Aunt Minnie'd find something we've overlooked," Marian said. "There was never a trick played in school but what she caught the funny boy that did it."

"Anyway," I said, "we've got the guy, if we haven't got the knife. It's a watertight case for the D. A.'s office."

The district attorney didn't see it in that light. "Find me the knife," he said, "and I'll put him in the chair. But you can't convict a man of murder because nobody else did it."

"That's what Aunt Minnie says," said my wife when I told her the case was at a standstill a week later. "I had a letter from her. She'll be back next week."

When the old dame arrived, she had us up in her room and listened to Marian and Ma Sanderson and me.

"Where's Finney?" she asked.

"Out of jail. He got a lawyer who sprung him."

"Have you got that inventory you made?"

I handed her a copy. She studied it. "Is this everything that was in the room at the time?"

"I'll swear to that," Marian said.

"So will I," said Ma.

"You spoke of the old man bringing in a fish in a parcel."

"That's right."

"Where's the fish?" she asked.

"He ate it, I suppose."

"Did he eat the bones? I don't see 'em here."

Marian and Ma and I looked at the inventory.

"You've got the wrapper down: 'Square of brown paper.' Where's the string?"

"Oh, to hell with the string!" I said. "Are you figuring that he wound up the knife in the string and swallowed it?"

"I never did like comedy cops," Aunt Minnie said. "Not even in the movies. If I were after that knife, I'd look on the roof."

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"What roof?"

"This roof and any other roof contiguous."

"Look, Aunt Minnie," I said. "Babe Ruth himself couldn't reach out between those bars and flip a knife five stories up onto a roof."

"You'd better do as Aunt Minnie says," my wife told me.

There's a lot of rubbish on tenement roofs, but I found the knife, two buildings away back of a chimney. Anyway, I found *a* knife and a fish knife at that. Of course, there wasn't a chance of fingerprints after it had been out in all that weather. I brought it back to Aunt Minnie.

"Find anything else?"

"I wasn't looking for anything else."

"No fishbones? No string? No brains!" said Aunt Minnie.

So I went back and brought in the lot. "Who put 'em there and why?" I asked.

"In the jargon of your district attorney, the accessory after the fact."

"Oh, yeah? How?"

"Why, I suppose the murderer passed 'em out through the window."

"Easy, like that! And how did he reach the window? Jump up eighteen feet from the courtyard and hang to the bars? Or scrounge his way across that ledge?"

"Funnier than ever," said Aunt Minnie, "but not too smart. The ledge."

"How could any man navigate a six-inch ledge?" Miriam asked.

"He couldn't. A cat could. Many's the time I've watched that ugly tom make it on his way to old Gommer's window."

"Wait a minute!" I said. "Are you telling us that a tomcat would carry away a knife and hide it on a roof?"

"If it was fixed up right, he would."

Then I began to get it, but I didn't like it. "How am I going to put that up to the D. A.?" I asked.

"I wouldn't," she advised.

"So the murderer not only gets out but collects his legacy, does he? That kind of gripes me, Aunt Minnie."

"Well, I wouldn't be so sure of his collecting," Aunt Minnie said. "You didn't know that I once taught drawing, did you?"

She wouldn't explain that crack until Peter Finney's death. He had received a large envelope in his morning mail and collapsed in the hallway when he opened it. On recovering, he went to the drug store for medicine, but bought rat poison instead.

Aunt Minnie looked pretty solemn when she got the news. "Perhaps it's just as well," she said, "though I didn't foresee quite that result."

"What was in your letter, Aunt Minnie?" my wife asked.

"It wasn't a letter. It was a free-hand sketch of a cat crawling on a ledge with a fish bound around with string in his mouth, and a knife handle sticking out beyond the fish."

Which goes to prove, my wife says, that women know more than men about a lot of things, including logic. Maybe so.

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What two forms of entertainment fiction are most typically American? Species born and bred in, indigenous to, the American mind and the American soil. One might say, culturally American. Surely the detective story is one — the modern detective story was conceived and formulated by an American, Edgar Allan Poe; and even more surely, the Western story is another, although we have no idea which American writer was the first to see the enormous fictional possibilities of cowboys and Indians, of the fast trigger, fast horses, and slow drawl.

So when a story combines Western characters, background, and lingo with crime-story plot and detective-story technique, that story can be called All-American in the deepest sense of the word — as well as sure-fire in its appeal.

Here is such a story — and by one of the "greats" among Western-story writers. "The Two-Gun Man" by Stewart Edward White comes from his classic book, ARIZONA NIGHTS *(1907), which may sound only vaguely familiar to the youngsters of today — with their Hopalong Cassidy and Lone Ranger — but which is full of red-blooded nostalgia for those youngsters' fathers and uncles. The clean, invigorating, outdoor quality that thrilled nearly half a century ago is still magically present in "the topaz and violet and saffron and amethyst and mauve and lilac" of the Chiricahuas, and in "the magnificent, flaming, changing, beautiful, dreadful desert of the Arizona plains."*

THE TWO-GUN MAN

by STEWART EDWARD WHITE

BUCK JOHNSON was American born, but with a black beard and a dignity of manner that had earned him the title of Señor. He had drifted into southeastern Arizona in the days of Cochise and Victorio and Geronimo. He had persisted, and so in time had come to control the water — and hence the grazing — of nearly all the Soda Springs Valley. His troubles were many, and his difficulties great. There were the ordinary problems of lean and dry years. There were also the extraordinary problems of devastating Apaches, rivals for early and ill-defined range rights — and cattle rustlers.

Señor Buck Johnson was a man of capacity, courage, directness of method, and perseverance. Especially the latter. Therefore he had survived to see the Apaches subdued, the range rights adjusted, his cattle increased to thousands, grazing the area

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of a principality. Now, all the energy and fire of his frontiersman's nature he had turned to wiping out the third uncertainty of an uncertain business. He found it a task of some magnitude.

For Señor Buck Johnson lived just north of that terra incognita filled with the mystery of a double chance of death, from man or the flaming desert, known as the Mexican border. There, by natural gravitation, gathered all the desperate characters of three States and two republics. He who rode into it took good care that no one should ride behind him, lived warily, slept light, and breathed deep when once he had again sighted the familiar peaks of Cochise's Stronghold. No one professed knowledge of those who dwelt therein. They moved, mysterious as the desert illusions that compassed them about. As you rode, the ranges of mountains visibly changed form, the monstrous, snaky, sea-like growths of the cactus clutched at your stirrup, mock lakes sparkled and dissolved in the middle distance, the sun beat hot and merciless, the powdered dry alkali beat hotly and mercilessly back — and strange, grim men, swarthy, bearded, heavily armed, with red-rimmed unshifting eyes, rode silently out of the mists of illusion to look on you steadily, and then to ride silently back into the desert haze. They might be only the herders of the gaunt cattle, or again they might belong to the Lost Legion that peopled the country. All you could know was that of the men who entered, few returned.

Directly north of this unknown land you encountered parallel fences running across the country. They enclosed nothing, but offered a check to the cattle drifting toward the clutch of the renegades, and an obstacle to swift, dashing forays.

Of cattle rustling there are various forms. The boldest consists quite simply of running off a bunch of stock, hustling it over the Mexican line, and there selling it to some of the big Sonora ranch owners. Generally this sort means war. Also, there are subtler means, grading in skill from the rebranding through a wet blanket, through the crafty refashioning of a brand, to the various methods of separating the cow from her unbranded calf. In the course of his task Señor Buck Johnson would have to do with them all, but at present he existed in a state of warfare, fighting an enemy who stole as the Indians used to steal.

Already he had fought two pitched battles, and had won them both. His cattle increased, and he became rich. Nevertheless, he knew that constantly his resources were being drained. Time and again he and his new Texas foreman, Jed Parker, had followed the trail of a stampeded bunch of twenty or thirty, followed it on down through the Soda Springs Valley to the cut drift fences, there to abandon it. For, as yet, an armed force would be needed to penetrate the borderland. Once he and his men had experienced the glory of a night pursuit. Then, at the drift fences, he had fought one of his battles. But it was

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impossible adequately to patrol all parts of a range bigger than some Eastern States.

Buck Johnson did his best, but it was like stopping with sand the innumerable little leaks of a dam. Did his riders watch toward the Chiricahuas, then a score of beef steers disappeared from Grant's Pass forty miles away. Pursuit here meant leaving cattle unguarded there. It was useless, and the Señor soon perceived that sooner or later he must strike in offense.

For this purpose he began slowly to strengthen the forces of his riders. Men were coming in from Texas. They were good men, addicted to the grass-rope, the double cinch, and the ox-bow stirrup. Señor Johnson wanted men who could shoot, and he got them.

"Jed," said Señor Johnson to his foreman, "the next son-of-a-gun that rustles any of our cows is sure loading himself full of trouble. We'll hit his trail and we'll stay with it, and we'll reach his cattle-rustling conscience with a rope."

So it came about that a little army crossed the drift fences and entered the border country. Two days later it came out, and mighty pleased to be able to do so. The rope had not been used.

The reason for the defeat was quite simple. The thief had run his cattle through the lava beds where the trail at once became difficult to follow. This delayed the pursuing party; they ran out of water, and, as there was among them not one man well enough acquainted with the country to know where to find more, they had to return.

"No use, Buck," said Jed. "We'd any of us come in on a gun play, but we can't buck the desert. We'll have to get someone who knows the country."

"That's all right — but where?" queried Johnson.

"There's Pereza," suggested Parker. "It's the only town down near that country."

"Might get someone there," agreed the Señor.

Next day he rode away in search of a guide. The third evening he was back again, much discouraged.

"The country's no good," he explained. "The regular inhabitants're a set of bums and old soaks. The cowmen're all from north and don't know nothing more than we do. I found lots who claimed to know that country, but when I told 'em what I wanted they shied like a colt. I couldn't hire 'em, for no money, to go down in that country. They ain't got the nerve. I took two days to her, too, and rode out to a ranch where they said a man lived who knew all about it down there. Nary riffle. Man looked all right, but his tail went down like the rest when I told him what we wanted. Seemed plumb scairt to death. Says he lives too close to the gang. Says they'd wipe him out sure if he done it. Seemed plumb *scairt*." Buck Johnson grinned. "I told him so and he got hosstyle right off. Didn't seem no

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ways scairt of me. I don't know what's the matter with that outfit down there. They're plumb terrorized."

That night a bunch of steers was stolen from the very corrals of the home ranch. The home ranch was far north, near Fort Sherman itself, and so had always been considered immune from attack. Consequently these steers were very fine ones.

For the first time Buck Johnson lost his head and his dignity. He ordered the horses.

"I'm going to follow that —— —— into Sonora," he shouted to Jed Parker. "This thing's got to stop!"

"You can't make her, Buck," objected the foreman. "You'll get held up by the desert, and, if that don't finish you, they'll tangle you up in all those little mountains down there, and ambush you, and massacre you. You know it damn well."

"I don't give a ——," exploded Señor Johnson, "if they do. No man can slap my face and not get a run for it."

Jed Parker communed with himself.

"Señor," said he, at last, "it's no good; you can't do it. You got to have a guide. You wait three days and I'll get you one."

"You can't do it," insisted the Señor. "I tried every man in the district."

"Will you wait three days?" repeated the foreman.

Johnson pulled loose his latigo. His first anger had cooled.

"All right," he agreed, "and you can say for me that I'll pay five thousand dollars in gold and give all the men and horses he needs to the man who has the nerve to get back that bunch of cattle, and bring in the man who rustled them. I'll sure make this a test case."

So Jed Parker set out to discover his man with nerve.

At about ten o'clock of the Fourth of July a rider topped the summit of the last swell of land, and loped his animal down into the single street of Pereza. The buildings on either side were flat-roofed and coated with plaster. Over the sidewalks extended wooden awnings, beneath which opened very wide doors into the coolness of saloons. Each of these places ran a bar, and also games of roulette, faro, craps, and stud poker. Even this early in the morning every game was patronized.

The day was already hot with the dry, breathless, but exhilarating, heat of the desert. A throng of men idling at the edge of the sidewalks, jostling up and down their center, or eddying into the places of amusement, acknowledged the power of summer by loosening their collars, carrying their coats on their arms. They were as yet busily engaged in recognizing acquaintances. Later they would drink freely and gamble, and perhaps fight. Toward all but those whom they recognized they preserved an attitude of potential suspicion, for here were gathered the "bad men" of the border countries. A certain jealousy or touchy egotism lest the other man be

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considered quicker on the trigger, bolder, more aggressive than himself, kept each strung to tension. An occasional shot attracted little notice. Men in the cow-countries shoot as casually as we strike matches, and some subtle instinct told them that the reports were harmless.

As the rider entered the one street, however, a more definite cause of excitement drew the loose population toward the center of the road. Immediately their mass blotted out what had interested them. Curiosity attracted the saunterers, then in turn the frequenters of the bars and gambling games. In a very few moments the barkeepers, gamblers, and lookout men, held aloof only by the necessities of their calling, alone of all the population of Pereza were not included in the newly-formed ring.

The stranger pushed his horse resolutely to the outer edge of the crowd where, from his point of vantage, he could easily overlook their heads. He was a quiet-appearing young fellow, rather neatly dressed in the border costume, rode a "center fire," or single-cinch, saddle, and wore no chaps. He was what is known as a "two-gun man": that is to say, he wore a heavy Colt's revolver on either hip. The fact that the lower ends of his holsters were tied down, in order to facilitate the easy withdrawal of the revolvers, seemed to indicate that he expected to use them. He had, furthermore, a quiet gray eye, with the glint of steel that bore out the inference of the tied holsters.

The newcomer dropped his reins on his pony's neck, eased himself to an attitude of attention, and looked down gravely on what was taking place.

He saw over the heads of the bystanders a tall, muscular, wild-eyed man, hatless, his hair rumpled into staring confusion, his right sleeve rolled to his shoulder, a wicked-looking nine-inch knife in his hand, and a red bandana handkerchief hanging by one corner from his teeth.

"What's biting the locoed stranger?" the young man inquired of his neighbor.

The other frowned at him darkly.

"Dare's anyone to take the other end of that handkerchief in his teeth, and fight it out without letting go."

"Nice joyful proposition," commented the young man.

He settled himself to closer attention. The wild-eyed man was talking rapidly. What he said cannot be printed here. Mainly it was derogatory of the southern countries. Shortly it became boastful of the northern and then of the man who uttered it. He swaggered up and down, becoming always the more insolent as his challenge remained untaken.

"Why don't you take him up?" inquired the young man, after a moment.

"Not me!" negatived the other vigorously. "I'll go yore little old gunfight to a finish, but I don't want any cold steel in mine. Ugh! it gives me the shivers. It's a reg'lar Mexican trick! With a gun it's down and out, but

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this knife work is too slow and searchin'."

The newcomer said nothing, but fixed his eye again on the raging man with the knife.

"Don't you reckon he's bluffing?" he inquired.

"Not any!" denied the other with emphasis. "He's jest drunk enough to be crazy mad."

The newcomer shrugged his shoulders and cast his glance searchingly over the fringe of the crowd. It rested on a Mexican.

"Hi, Tony! come here," he called.

The Mexican approached, flashing his white teeth.

"Here," said the stranger, "lend me your knife a minute."

The Mexican, anticipating sport of his own peculiar kind, obeyed with alacrity.

"You fellows make me tired," observed the stranger, dismounting. "He's got the whole townful of you bluffed to a standstill. Damn if I don't try his little game."

He hung his coat on his saddle, shouldered his way through the press, which parted for him readily, and picked up the other corner of the handkerchief.

"Now, you mangy son-of-a-gun," said he.

Jed Parker straightened his back, rolled up the bandana handkerchief, and thrust it into his pocket, hit flat with his hand the tousled mass of his hair, and thrust the long hunting knife into its sheath.

"You're the man I want," said he.

Instantly the two-gun man had jerked loose his weapons and was covering the foreman.

"*Am* I!" he snarled.

"Not jest that way," explained Parker. "My gun is on my hoss, and you can have this old toad-sticker if you want it. I been looking for you, and took this way of finding you. Now, let's go talk."

The stranger looked him in the eye for nearly a half-minute without lowering his revolvers.

"I go you," said he briefly, at last.

But the crowd, missing the purport, and in fact the very occurrence of this colloquy, did not understand. It thought the bluff had been called, and naturally, finding harmless what had intimidated it, gave way to an exasperated impulse to get even.

"You — — — bluffer!" shouted a voice, "don't you think you can run any such ranikaboo here!"

Jed Parker turned humorously to his companion.

"Do we get that talk?" he inquired gently.

For answer the two-gun man turned and walked steadily in the direction of the man who had shouted. The latter's hand strayed uncertainly toward his own weapon, but the movement paused when the stranger's clear, steel eye rested on it.

"This gentleman," pointed out the two-gun man softly, "is an old friend of mine. Don't you get to calling of him names."

His eye swept the bystanders calmly.

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"Come on, Jack," said he, addressing Parker.

On the outskirts he encountered the Mexican from whom he had borrowed the knife.

"Here, Tony," said he with a slight laugh, "here's a *peso*. You'll find your knife back there where I had to drop her."

He entered a saloon, nodded to the proprietor, and led the way through it to a box-like room containing a board table and two chairs.

"Make good," he commanded briefly.

"I'm looking for a man with nerve," explained Parker, with equal succinctness. "You're the man."

"Well?"

"Do you know the country south of here?"

The stranger's eyes narrowed.

"Proceed," said he.

"I'm foreman of the Lazy Y of Soda Springs Valley range," explained Parker. "I'm looking for a man with sand enough and *sabe* of the country enough to lead a posse after cattle-rustlers into the border country."

"I live in this country," admitted the stranger.

"So do plenty of others, but their eyes stick out like two raw oysters when you mention the border country. Will you tackle it?"

"What's the proposition?"

"Come and see the old man. He'll put it to you."

They mounted their horses and rode the rest of the day. The desert compassed them about, marvelously changing shape and color, and every character, with all the noiselessness of phantasmagoria. At evening the desert stars shone steady and unwinking, like the flames of candles. By moonrise they came to the home ranch.

The buildings and corrals lay dark and silent against the moonlight that made of the plain a sea of mist. The two men unsaddled their horses and turned them loose in the wire-fenced "pasture," the necessary noises of their movements sounding sharp and clear against the velvet hush of the night. After a moment they walked stiffly past the sheds and cook shanty, past the men's bunk houses, and the tall windmill silhouetted against the sky, to the main building of the home ranch under its great cottonwoods. There a light still burned, for this was the third day, and Buck Johnson awaited his foreman.

Jed Parker pushed in without ceremony.

"Here's your man, Buck," said he.

The stranger had stepped inside and carefully closed the door behind him. The lamplight threw into relief the bold, free lines of his face, the details of his costume powdered thick with alkali, the shiny butts of the two guns in their open holsters tied at the bottom. Equally it defined the resolute countenance of Buck Johnson turned up in inquiry. The two men examined each other — and liked each other at once.

"How are you," greeted the cattleman.

"Good evening," responded the

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stranger, and he nodded agreeably.

"Sit down," invited Buck Johnson.

The stranger perched gingerly on the edge of a chair, with an appearance less of embarrassment than of habitual alertness.

"You'll take the job?" inquired the Señor.

"I haven't heard what it is," replied the stranger.

"Parker here —?"

"Said you'd explain."

"Very well," said Buck Johnson. He paused a moment, collecting his thoughts. "There's too much cattle rustling here. I'm going to stop it. I've got good men here ready to take the job, but no one who knows the country south. Three days ago I had a bunch of cattle stolen right here from the home-ranch corrals, and by one man, at that. It wasn't much of a bunch — about twenty head — but I'm going to make a starter right here, and now. I'm going to get that bunch back, and the man who stole them, if I have to go to hell to do it. And I'm going to do the same with every case of rustling that comes up from now on. I don't care if it's only one cow, I'm going to get it back — every trip. Now, I want to know if you'll lead a posse down into the south country and bring out that last bunch, and the man who rustled them?"

"I don't know —" hesitated the stranger.

"I offer you five thousand dollars in gold if you'll bring back those cows and the man who stole 'em," repeated Buck Johnson. "And I'll give you all the horses and men you think you need."

"I'll do it," replied the two-gun man promptly.

"Good!" cried Buck Johnson, "and you better start tomorrow."

"I shall start tonight — right now."

"Better yet. How many men do you want, and grub for how long?"

"I'll play her a lone hand."

"Alone!" exclaimed Johnson, his confidence visibly cooling. "Alone! Do you think you can make her?"

"I'll be back with those cattle in not more than ten days."

"And the man," added the Señor.

"And the man. What's more, I want that money here when I come in. I don't aim to stay in this country overnight."

A grin overspread Buck Johnson's countenance. He understood.

"Climate not healthy for you?" he hazarded. "I guess you'd be safe enough all right with us. But suit yourself. The money will be here."

"That's agreed?" insisted the two-gun man.

"Sure."

"I want a fresh horse — I'll leave mine — he's a good one. I want a little grub."

"All right. Parker'll fit you out."

The stranger rose.

"I'll see you in about ten days."

"Good luck," Señor Buck Johnson wished him.

The next morning Buck Johnson took a trip down into the "pasture"

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of five hundred wire-fenced acres.

"He means business," he confided to Jed Parker, on his return. "That cavallo of his is a heap sight better than the Shorty horse we let him take. Jed, you found your man with nerve, all right."

The two settled down to wait, if not with confidence, at least with interest. Sometimes, remembering the desperate character of the outlaws, their fierce distrust of any intruder, the wildness of the country, Buck Johnson and his foreman inclined to the belief that the stranger had undertaken a task beyond the powers of any one man. Again, remembering the stranger's cool gray eye, the poise of his demeanor, the quickness of his movements, and the two guns with tied holsters to permit of easy withdrawal, they were almost persuaded that he might win.

"He's one of those long-chance fellows," surmised Jed. "He likes excitement. I see that by the way he takes up with my knife play. He'd rather leave his hide on the fence than stay in the corral."

"Well, he's all right," replied Señor Buck Johnson, "and if he ever gets back, which same I'm some doubtful of, his dinero'll be here waiting for him."

In pursuance of this he rode into Willets, where shortly the overland train brought him from Tucson the five thousand dollars in double eagles.

In the meantime the regular life of the ranch went on. Each morning Sang, the Chinese cook, rang the great bell, summoning the men. They ate, and then caught up the saddle horses for the day, turning those not wanted from the corral into the pasture. Shortly they jingled away in different directions, two by two, on the slow Spanish trot of the cowpuncher. All day long thus they would ride, without food or water for man or beast, looking the range, identifying the stock, branding the young calves, examining generally into the state of affairs, gazing always with grave eyes on the magnificent, flaming, changing, beautiful, dreadful desert of the Arizona plains. At evening, when the colored atmosphere, catching the last glow, threw across the Chiricahuas its veil of mystery, they jingled in again, two by two, untired, unhasting, the glory of the desert in their deep-set, steady eyes.

And all the day long, while they were absent, the cattle, too, made their pilgrimage, straggling in singly, in pairs, in bunches, in long files, leisurely, ruminantly, without haste. There, at the long troughs filled by the windmill or the blindfolded pump mule, they drank, then filed away again into the mists of the desert. And Señor Buck Johnson, or his foreman, Parker, examined them for their condition, noting the increase, remarking the strays from another range. Later, perhaps, they, too, rode abroad. The same thing happened at nine other ranches from five to ten miles apart, where dwelt other fierce, silent men all under the authority of Buck Johnson.

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And when night fell, and the topaz and violet and saffron and amethyst and mauve and lilac had faded suddenly from the Chiricahuas, like a veil that has been rent, and the ramparts had become slate-gray and then black — the soft-breathed night wandered here and there over the desert, and the land fell under an enchantment even stranger than the day's.

So the days went by, wonderful, fashioning the ways and the characters of men. Seven passed. Buck Johnson and his foreman began to look for the stranger. Eight, they began to speculate. Nine, they doubted. On the tenth they gave him up — and he came.

They knew him first by the soft lowing of cattle. Jed Parker, dazzled by the lamp, peered out from the door, and made him out dimly, turning the animals into the corral. A moment later his pony's hoofs impacted softly on the baked earth, he dropped from the saddle and entered the room.

"I'm late," said he briefly, glancing at the clock, which indicated ten; "but I'm here."

His manner was quick and sharp, almost breathless, as though he had been running.

"Your cattle are in the corral: all of them. Have you the money?"

"I have the money here," replied Buck Johnson, laying his hand against a drawer, "and it's ready for you when you've earned it. I don't care so much for the cattle. What I wanted is the man who stole them. Did you bring him?"

"Yes, I brought him," said the stranger. "Let's see that money."

Buck Johnson threw open the drawer, and drew from it the heavy canvas sack.

"It's here. Now bring in your prisoner."

The two-gun man seemed suddenly to loom large in the doorway. The muzzles of his revolvers covered the two before him. His speech came short and sharp.

"I told you I'd bring back the cows and the one who rustled them," he snapped. "I've never lied to a man yet. Your stock is in the corral. I'll trouble you for that five thousand. I'm the man who stole your cattle!"

"O"

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BLIND DATE

by CORNELL WOOLRICH

LARRY didn't even know his father was in the house until he met him coming down the stairs. It was a little after five and he'd just come in from the beach. "Hello Dad," he said and held his hand out in welcome. "You didn't tell us you were coming down from New York tonight!" Then he said: "Gee, you look white! Been working too hard?"

Larry idolized his father and worried continually about the way he kept slaving to provide for and indulge his family. Not that they weren't comfortably well off now — but the doctor had told the elder Weeks that with that heart of his it was only a matter of months now.

Mr. Weeks didn't answer, nor did he take his son's outstretched hand. Instead he sat down suddenly in the middle of the staircase and hid his face behind his own hands. "Don't go upstairs, kid!" he groaned hollowly.

Larry did just the opposite. His own face grown white in dread premonition, he leaped past his father and ran on up. He turned down the cottage's short upper hallway and threw open the door at the end of it and looked in. It was the first room he'd come to. It was the right room.

She lay partly across the bed with her head hanging down above the floor and her light brown hair sweeping the carpet. One arm was twisted behind her back; the other one flailed out stiff and straight, reaching desperately for the help that had never come. She was his father's wife, Larry's stepmother. The dread he had felt on the stairs became a certainty now as he looked in. He had expected something like this sooner or later.

He turned her over, lifted her up, tried to rouse her by shaking her, by working her lower jaw back and forth with his hand. It was too late. Her eyes stared at him unblinkingly, her head rolled around like a rubber ball. Her neck had been broken. There were livid purple marks on her throat where fingers had pressed inward.

Larry let her drop back again like a rag doll, left the room and closed the door behind him. He stumbled down the hall to the head of the stairs. His father was still sitting there halfway down, his head bowed low over his knees. Larry slumped down beside him. After a while he put one hand on his father's shoulder, then let it slip off again. "I'm with you," he said.

His father lifted his head. "She gone?"

Larry nodded.

"I know she must be," his father said. "I heard it crack." He shuddered

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and covered his ears, as though he were afraid of hearing it over again.

"She asked for it and she got it," Larry remarked bitterly.

His father looked up sharply. "You knew?"

"All the time. He used to come down weekends and she'd meet him at the Berkeley-Carteret."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"She was your wife," Larry said. "Wouldn't I have looked great."

On a little table down at the foot of the stairs the telephone started to ring, and they both stiffened and their pale faces grew even paler. They turned and looked at each other without a word while it went on shattering the ominous stillness of the house.

"I'll get it," Larry said suddenly. "I know all the answers." He got up and went down to it, while his father gazed after him fearfully. He waited a minute to brace himself, then swiftly unhooked the receiver. "Hello," he said tensely. Then with a quick let-down of relief, "No, she hasn't come back from the beach yet." He exchanged a glance with his father, halfway up the stairs. "Why don't you pick her up there instead of calling for her here at the house? You know where to find her. She won't be back for hours yet, and you'd only have to hang around here waiting." Then he added: "No, I don't mean to be inhospitable, only I thought it would save time. 'Bye." He puffed his cheeks and blew out his breath with relief as he hung up. A couple of crystal drops oozed out on his forehead. "Helen's boy-friend," he said, turning to the man on the stairs. Helen was his sister. "If he does what I told him, it'll give us a couple of hours at least."

The older man spoke without his lifting his head at all. "What's the use? Better phone the police and get it over with."

Larry said: "No." Then he yelled it at the top of his voice. "No, I tell you! You're my father — I can't, I won't let you! She wasn't worth your life! You know what the doctors said. You haven't much time anyway — Oh, God!" He went close and jabbed his knee at Weeks to bring him to. "Pull yourself together. We've got to get her out of here. I don't care where it happened, only it didn't happen here — it happened some place else."

Twenty-one years of energy pulled forty-two years of apathy to its feet by the shoulders. "You — you were in New York. You *are* in New York right now, do you get me? You didn't come down here, just as none of us expected you to." He began to shake his father, to help the words and the idea that was behind them to sink in. "Did anyone see you on the train, at the depot just now, or coming into the house? Anyone who knows you by sight?"

Weeks ran his hand across his forehead, "Coming in, no," he said. "The street was dead, they were all down at the beach or on the boardwalk. The depot I'm not sure about, some of the redcaps might know me by sight —"

"But they only see you one day

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every week. They might get mixed up after a day or two in remembering just the exact day. We gotta take a chance. And make sure they see you tomorrow when you *do* come down, that'll cover today. Talk to one of them, lose something, stumble and get helped up, anything at all. Now about the train. The conductor must know you by sight —"

Weeks' face brightened all of a sudden, as the idea began to catch on, take hold of him. The self-preservation instinct isn't easily suppressed. He grasped his son by the lapel of his coat. "Larry," he said eagerly, "I just remembered — my commutation ticket —"

Larry's face paled again. "And I," he groaned, "forgot all about that. The date'll be punched — we can't get around that —"

"No, wait a minute. Just today — something that never happened before all summer — my mind was haywire I guess on account of what I'd found out — but when I got to Penn Station I found I didn't have it with me, I'd left it at the office. I had to buy an ordinary ticket to get down here —"

"Then it's a push-over!" exclaimed Larry. "It's a Godsend. It'd be a crime not to take advantage of a break like that. Doesn't it convince you what the best thing to do is? If I were superstitious I'd call it —" He stopped short. "Wait a minute, round-trip I hope? Or will you have to step up and buy a return ticket at this end?"

"It's here," panted Weeks, fumbling in his coat. "I was burning so, I didn't even notice —" He dragged it out and they both gave a simultaneous sigh of relief.

"Swell," said Larry. "That unpunched commutation ticket is going to be an A-one alibi in itself. Hang onto it whatever you do. But we'll fix it all up brown. Can you get hold of someone in the city to pass the evening with you — or better still two or three of your friends?"

"I can get in touch with Fred German. He always rolls up a gang of stay-outs as he goes along."

"Go to a show with 'em, bend the elbow, get a little lit, stay with them as late as you possibly can manage it. And before you leave them — not after but *before*, so they all can see and hear you — call me long-distance down here. That means your name'll go down on the company's records from that end. I'll have your cue ready for you by that time. If she's not dead yet, then the rotgut made you sentimental and you wanted to talk to your family, that's all. But if I have everything under control by that time, then I'll have bad news for you then and there. You can stage a cloudburst in front of them and continue under your own speed from that point on. But until that happens, watch your step. Keep the soft pedal on. Don't be jerky and nervous and punchy. Don't give 'em an idea you've got anything on your mind. The better you know people, the better they can tell when something's

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wrong with you. Now all that is your job. Mine" — he drew in his breath — "is upstairs. Got your hat?" He took out his watch. "Get back to the station, the six o'clock pulls out in ten minutes. They're starting to drift back from the beach, so go to Charlton Street, one over, and keep your head down. Don't look at anyone. Thank God she wasn't much on getting acquainted with the neighbors —" He was leading him toward the door as he spoke.

"What're you going to do?" asked Weeks with bated voice.

"I don't know," said Larry, "but I don't want an audience for it, whatever it is. All I need is darkness, and thinking how swell you've been to me all my life — and I can do the rest. I'll pull through. Stand behind the door a minute till I take a squint." He opened the door, sauntered out on the bungalow doorstep, and looked casually up in one direction, then down in the other, as though seeking a breath of air. Then suddenly he was back in again, pushing his father irresistibly before him. "Hurry up, not a living soul in sight. It may not be this way again for the rest of the evening."

Weeks' body suddenly stiffened, held back. "No, I can't do it, can't let you! What am I thinking of anyway, letting my own son hold the bag for me. If they nab you doing this they'll hang it on you —"

"Do you want to die at Trenton?" Larry asked him fiercely. The answer was on Weeks' face, would have been on anyone's face. "Then lemme do it my way!" They gripped hands for a second. Something like a sob sounded in Weeks' throat. Then he was over the threshold and Larry was pushing the door silently after him.

Just before it met the frame Weeks pivoted abruptly, jumped back, and rammed his foot into the opening. There was a new urgency in his voice. "Helen. I see her coming!"

"Get back in!" snapped Larry. "Can't make it now. Her eyes are too good, she'll spot you even from a distance." He closed the door on the two of them. "He with her?"

"No."

"Then they missed connections. I'll send her right out again after him." He swore viciously. "If you're not out of here in five minutes, you don't make that train — and the later you get back the riskier it gets. As it is, you have three hours you can't account for. Here — the clothes closet — be ready to light out the first chance you get."

Weeks, pulling the door of the hall closet after him, murmured: "Don't you think the kid would —"

All Larry said was: "She was pretty chummy with Doris."

Her key was already jiggling in the front door. Larry seemed to be coming toward it as she got it open and they met face to face. She was in her bathing suit. He'd overlooked that when he'd spoken to her boy friend.

"Who was that came to the door just now, before I got here?" she asked.

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"Me," he said curtly.

"I know, I saw you, but I thought I saw someone else too, a minute later. It looked like two people from where I was."

"Well it wasn't," he snapped.

"Oh, grouchy again." She started for the stairs. "Doris back yet?"

"No," he said firmly.

"Good, then I can swipe some of her face powder while she's out." She ran lightly up the stairs. He went cold for a minute, then he passed her like a bullet passing an arrow. He was standing in front of the door with his back to it when she turned down the upstairs corridor. "What's the matter with *you?*" she asked drily. "Feel playful?" She tried to elbow him aside.

"Lay off," he said huskily. "She raised Cain just before she went out about your helping yourself to her things, said she wants it stopped." He got the key out of the door behind his back and dropped it into his back pocket.

"I don't believe it," she said. "That isn't like her at all. I'm going to ask her to her face when she comes ba—" She rattled the doorknob unsuccessfully.

"See, what'd I tell you?" he murmured. "She must have locked it and taken the key with her." He moved down the hall again, as if going to his own room.

"If it was already locked," she called after him, "why did you jump up here in such a hurry to keep me out?"

He had an answer for that one though, too. "I didn't want you to find out. It's hell when trouble starts between the women of a family."

"Maybe I'm crazy," she said, "but I have the funniest feeling that there's something going on around here today — everything's suddenly different from what it is other days. What was the idea freezing Gordon out when he tried to call for me?"

She had stopped before her own door, which was next to their stepmother's. He was nearer the stair-well than she was, almost directly over it. From below came the faint double click of a door as it opened then shut again. Even he could hardly hear it, she certainly couldn't. The front door — he'd made it. Larry straight-armed himself against the stair railing and let a lot of air out of his lungs.

Without turning his head he knew she was standing there up the hall, watching him, waiting. What the hell was she waiting for? Oh yes, she'd asked him a question, she was waiting for the answer. That was it. Absently he gave it to her. "You weren't here, I only told him where to find you." She went into her room and banged the door shut.

And with that sound something suddenly exploded in his brain. The connecting bathroom, between her room and Doris's! She could get in through there! Not only could but most certainly would, out of sheer stubborness now, because she thought Doris was trying to keep her out. Women were that way. And when

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she did — there in full view upon the bed, what *he* had seen, what his own loyalty had been strong enough to condone, but what might prove too much for hers. He couldn't take the chance. His father's life was at stake, he couldn't gamble with that.

He dove back to that door again and whipped the key from his pocket. He got the door open as quietly as he could, but he was in too much of a hurry and it was too close to her own room to be an altogether soundless operation. Then, when he was in, with the twisted body in full view, he saw what had covered him. She was in the bathroom already, but she had the water roaring into the washbasin and that kept her from hearing. But the door between was already open about a foot, must have been that way all afternoon. Just one look was all that was needed, just one look in without even opening it any more than it already was. She hadn't given that look yet. He could be sure of that because her scream would have told him, but any minute now, any fraction of a second — He could see her in the mirror. She had the straps of her bathing suit down and was rinsing her face with cold water.

There was no time to get the body out of the room altogether. He didn't dare try. That much movement, the mere lifting and carrying of it, would surely attract her attention. And the long hall outside — where could he take it? The thought of trying deftly to compose and rearrange it where it lay, into the semblance of taking a nap, came to him for a moment and was rejected too. There wasn't time enough even for that, and anyway he'd already told her she was out. All this in the two or three stealthy cat-like steps that took him from the door to the side of the bed.

As he reached it he already knew what the only possible thing to do was, for the time being. Even to get it into the clothes closet was out of the question.

He dropped to his knees, crouched below the level of the bed on the side away from the bathroom, pulled the corpse toward him by one wrist and one ankle, and as it dropped off the side, his own body broke its fall. It dropped heavily athwart his thighs. The way the arms and legs retained their posture betokened rigor already, but made it easier to handle if anything. From where it was, across his lap, two good shoves got it under the bed, and he left it there.

Under and beyond the bed, on a level with his eyes, he could see the threshold of the bathroom. While he looked, and before there was any chance to scurry across the room to the hall door, Helen's feet and ankles came into view. They paused there for a moment, toes pointed his way, and he quickly flattened himself out, chin on floor. She was looking in. But she couldn't see under the bed, nor beyond it to the other side where he was, without bending over.

He held his breath. Maybe she'd go away again, now that she'd glanced in. But she didn't. The bare ankles in

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houseslippers crossed the threshold into the room. They came directly over toward him, growing bigger, like in a nightmare, as they drew nearer. They stopped on the other side of the bed from him, so close that her knees must be touching it. And one slipper was an inch away from Doris's rigidly outstretched hand. Oh my God, he thought, if she looks down at the floor — or if she comes around to this side!

What did she want there by the bed, what did she see, what was she looking at? Was there blood on it? No, there couldn't be, no skin had been broken, only her neck. Had something belonging to the dead woman been left on the bed, something he'd overlooked?

The bedclothes on his side brushed his face suddenly, moved upward a little. The danger signal went all over his body like an electric shock, until he understood. Oh, that was it! In dislodging the body he'd dragged them down a little. Womanlike she was smoothing the covers out again, tugging them back in place. Her feet shifted down toward the foot a little, then back toward the head again, as she completed her task. Momentarily he expected to see one of them go in too far and come down on the dead flesh of that upturned palm. Momentarily he expected her to come around to his side. Or even see him over the top of the bed, if she leaned too far across it. He lived hours in those few seconds. But she didn't do any of those things.

The feet turned, showed him their heels, and started back across the room growing smaller again. He was too prostrated even to sigh, he just lay there with his mouth open like a fish. She didn't go out, though. The feet skipped the opening to the bathroom and stopped before Doris's dresser over to one side. Helping herself to the face powder. But now she had a mirror in front of her, damn it! And he knew what mirrors were. If, for instance, it was tilted at a slight angle, it would show her the floor behind her — better than she could see it herself.

He heard the thud of Doris's powder-box as she put it down again. He waited for the scream that would surely come as she raised her eyes to the quicksilver before her. He lay there tense, as rigid as that other form next to him even if a little warmer. He wondered why he didn't get it over with by jumping up and showing himself, saying, "Yes, I'm here — and look what's beside me!" But he didn't. The time to do that had been when she first came in downstairs. That time was past now.

And then just when he'd quit hoping, there was a little shuffling sound and her feet had carried her back over the threshold and out of the room, and he was alone with the dead.

He couldn't get up for a while — even though he knew that right now was the best time, while she was busy dressing in her own room, to get out of there. He felt weak all over. When he finally did totter upright it wasn't

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to the outside door that he went but to the one to the bathroom.

He carefully eased it shut and locked it on his side. Let her suspect what she wanted, she wasn't going to get back in there again until the grisly evidence was out of the way! And that would have to wait until she was out of the house. He cursed her bitterly, and her pal Gordon even more so, for unknowingly adding to his troubles like this. He even cursed the dead woman for not dissolving into thin air once she were dead. He cursed everyone but the man who was by now speeding back to New York and safety; he was loyal to him to the last breath in his body. He went out into the hall and once more locked the dead woman's door behind him, once more extracted the key.

Just as he got in the clear once more, the phone started downstairs. It wasn't New York yet, too early. The train hadn't even got there yet. Helen stuck her head out of her room and called: "If it's Gordon, tell him I'm ready to leave now, not to be so impatient!" But it wasn't Gordon. It was an older voice, asking for Doris. The masculine "hello" Larry gave it seemed to leave it at a loss. Larry caught right on; he did some quick thinking. She'd been ready to leave an hour ago, she'd been going to this voice, and had never got there because death had stopped her in her own room.

Larry thought savagely, "It was your party. You're going to pay for it!" He tried to make his voice sound boyish, cordial. "She's gone out," he said with a cheerful ring, "but she left a message in case anyone called up for her. Only I don't know if you're the right party —"

"Who is this speaking?" said the voice suspiciously.

"I'm Helen's boy friend." That ought to be all right. He must know by now that Doris had been pretty thick with Helen, that therefore any friends of the latter would be neutral, not hostile like himself.

The voice was still cagey though. "How is it you're there alone?"

"I'm not. Helen's here with me, but she's upstairs dressing. Can't come to the phone, so she asked me to give the message —"

"What is it? This is the right party," the voice bit in.

"Well, Mrs. Weeks was called out this afternoon. Some people dropped in from the city and she couldn't get away from them. She said if anyone called, to say she'd gone to the Pine Tree Inn for dinner. You know where that is?" Why wouldn't he? Larry himself had seen the two of them dancing there more than once, and had promptly backed out again in a hurry each time.

But the voice wasn't committing itself. "I think so — it's a little way out on the road to Lakewood, isn't it?"

"You can't miss it," said Larry pointedly. "It's got a great big sign that lights up the road."

The voice caught on. "Oh, then

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she's going to wai — Then she'll be there?"

"These people are only passing through, they're not staying. She'll be free at about nine thirty. You see they're not bringing her back, so she thought if you wanted to pick her up with your car out there — Otherwise she'd have to phone for a taxi and wait until it got out there."

"Yeah, I could do that," said the voice hesitantly. "Y'sure she said she'll be — free by nine thirty?" Alone, was the word he wanted to use, Larry knew.

"That's the time Helen told me to say," he reassured. "Oh, and I nearly forgot —" Like hell he had! It was more important than everything else put together, but it had to be dished out carefully so as not to waken suspicion. "She said you don't have to drive right up to the place if you don't feel like it, you can sound your horn from that clump of pines down the road. You can wait there. She'll come out to you."

He would go for that idea, Larry felt, if only to avoid getting stuck with any possible bill that she might have run up in the roadhouse. That clump of pines wasn't new to him anyway. Larry'd already seen his car berthed in it while they were inside dancing — all to get out of paying the extra charge the inn made for parking. He'd known whose it was because he'd seen them both go back to it once to smoke a cigarette out under the stars.

He heard Helen coming down the stairs, dressed at last and ready to clear out, yet he didn't dare break the connection too abruptly.

"Who'you talking to?" she said in her clear, shrill voice and stopped beside him. But he'd counted on her saying something, and the mouthpiece was already buried against his shirt-front by the time she spoke. Her voice couldn't reach it.

"Sweetie of mine," he said limply. "Have a heart, don't listen —" His eyes stared tensely at her. While she stood there he couldn't uncover the thing and speak into it himself. One peep from her and the voice at the other end would ask to speak to her, and she wasn't in on the set-up. On the other hand he had to keep talking, couldn't just stand there like that.

"All right, son," the voice sounded into his ear. "I'll do that. You sure you got the message straight now?"

"Looks like you've got a bad case of it," said Helen derisively. "Your eyes are staring out of your head. I wish you could see yourself —" But she moved away, started for the front door.

"Absolutely. Just like I told you," he said into the instrument.

"All right, thanks a lot," the voice came back. There was a click at the other end. He felt himself caving in at his middle.

"Give her my love," Helen was saying from the open doorway.

"There's a fresh dame here sends you her love, honey," he said into the dead phone. "But she's not as pretty as you are."

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As his sister banged the front door after her, the fake grin left his face with it. He parked the phone and leaned his head weakly against the wall for a minute or two. He'd been through too much in just one hour, too much to take without leaning against something. And there was lots to come yet, he knew. Plenty.

He was alone in the house now with the body of a murdered woman. That didn't frighten him. It was getting it out of there that worried him — with a double row of porches to buck in either direction, porches jammed with the rocking-chair brigade on sentinel duty. Yet out it must go, and not cut up small in any valise either. That body had a date with its own murder. It had to travel to get there, and it had to travel whole. Though at this very minute it was already as dead as it would ever be, its murder was still several hours off and a good distance away. Nine thirty, in a clump of trees near Pine Tree Inn, just as a starting-point. Details could come later. The important thing was to get it away from this house, where no murder had ever taken place, and have it meet up with its murderer, who didn't know that was what he was yet, and wasn't expecting to kill.

Let him worry about getting rid of it after that! Let him find out how much harder it is to shake off the embrace of dead arms than it is of living ones! Let him try to explain what he was doing with it in a lonely clump of trees at the side of the road, at that hour and that far from town — and see if he'd be believed! That is, if he had guts enough to do the only thing there was for him to do — raise a holler, report it then and there, brazen it out, let himself in for it. But he wouldn't, he was in too deep himself. He'd lose his head like a thousand others had before him. He'd leave it where it was and beat it like the very devil to save his own skin. Or else he'd take it with him and try to dump it somewhere, cover it somehow. Anything to shake himself free of it. And once he did that, woe betide him!

The eyes of the living were going to be on hand tonight, at just the wrong time for him — just when he was pulling out of that clump of trees, or just as he went flashing past the noon-bright glare in front of the inn on the road away from Asbury, to get rid of her in the dark open country.

She would be reported missing the first thing in the morning, or even before — when his father phoned — Larry would see to that. Not many people had seen them dancing together and lapping their Martinis together and smoking cigarettes in a parked car together — but just enough of them had to do the damage.

He said to himself again what he'd said when he answered the man's phone-call. "It was your party; you're gonna pay for it, not Dad. She's gonna be around your neck tonight choking you, like he choked her!"

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Only a minute had gone by since Helen had banged the front door after her. Larry didn't move, he was still standing there leaning his head against the wall. She might come back, she might find out she'd forgotten something. He gave her time to get as far as the Boardwalk, two blocks over. Once she got that far she wouldn't come back any more, even if she had forgotten something. She'd be out until twelve now with Gordon. Three minutes went by — five. She'd hit the Boardwalk now.

He took his head away from the wall but he didn't move. He took out a cigarette and lit it. He had all the time in the world and he wanted that last silvery gleam of twilight out of the sky before he got going. It was a lot safer here in the house with her than out in the open under those pine trees. He smoked the cigarette down to its last inch, slowly not nervously. He'd needed that. Now he felt better, felt up to what was ahead of him. He took a tuck in his belt and moved away from the wall.

He wasn't bothering with any fake alibi for himself. His father had a peach and that was all he cared about. If, through some unforeseen slip-up the thing boomeranged back to their own doorstep in spite of everything, then he'd take it on — himself. He didn't give a rap, as long as it wasn't fastened on his father. His own alibi, if worst came to worst, would be simply the truth — that he'd been in the house here the whole time.

He pulled down all the shades on all the windows. Then he lit just one light, so he could see on the stairs. From the street it would look like no one was home and a night-light had been left burning. Then he went upstairs and got her out from under the bed.

He was surprised at how little she weighed. The first thing he did was carry her downstairs and stretch her on the floor, over to one side of the stairs. To go out she had to leave by the ground floor anyway. Then he sat down next to her, on the lowest step of the stairs, and for a long time nothing else happened. He was thinking. The quarter hour chimed from somewhere outside. Eight fifteen that was. He still had loads of time. But he'd better be starting soon now, the Pine Tree Inn wasn't any five minutes away from here. The thing was — how to go about it.

It was right there under his eyes the whole time, while he'd been racking his brains out. A spark from his cigarette did it — he'd lit another one. It fell down next to her, and he had to put his foot on it to make it go out. That made him notice the rug she was lying on. About eight by ten it was, a light-weight bright-colored summer rug. He got up and beat it over to the phone directory and looked under *Carpet Cleaners.*

He called a number, then another, then another, and another. Finally he got a tumble from someone called Saroukian. "How late do you stay open tonight?"

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They closed at six, but they'd call for the article the first thing in the morning.

"Well, look," he said, "if I bring it over myself tonight, won't there be someone there to take it in? I'll just leave it with you tonight, and you don't need to start work on it until you're ready."

They evidently lived right in back of, or right over, their cleaning shop. At first they tried to argue him out of it. Finally they told him he could bring it around and ring the bell, but they wouldn't be responsible for it.

"That's O. K.," he said. "I won't have time in the morning and it's gotta be attended to." He hung up and went over to get it ready for them.

He moved her over right into the middle of it, the long way. Then he got his fountain pen out, shoved back the plunger, and wrecked the border with it until there was no more ink in the thing. It took ink beautifully, that rug. He went and got some good strong twine, and he rolled the rug around her tight as a corset and tied it at both ends, at about where her ankles were and at about where her broken neck was. It bulged a little in the middle, so he tied it there too and evened it out. When he got through it wasn't much thicker than a length of sewer pipe. Her loosened hair was still spilling out at one end though, and there was another round opening down where her feet were. He shoved the hair all back in on top of her head where it belonged, and got two small cushions off the sofa and wedged one in at each end, rammed it down with all his might. They could stand cleaning too, just like the rug. That was the beauty of a bloodless murder, you weren't afraid to leave anything at the cleaner's. He hoisted the long pillar up onto his shoulder to try it out. It wasn't too heavy, he could make it.

He put it down again and went upstairs to the room where it had happened, and lit up and looked around for the last time. Under the bed and on top of it and all over, to make sure nothing had been overlooked. There wasn't a speck of anything. He went to her jewel case and rummaged through it. Most of the gadgets just had initials, but there was a wristwatch there that had her name in full on the inside of the case. He slipped that in his pocket. He also took a powder compact, and slipped a small snapshot of herself she'd had taken in an automatic machine under the lid, just for luck. He wanted to make it as easy for them as he could.

He put out the lights and went downstairs. He opened the front door wide and went back in again. "From now on," he told himself, "I don't think; I let my reflexes work for me!" He picked the long cylinder up with both arms, got it to the porch, and propped it upright against the side of the door for a minute while he closed the door after him. Then he heaved it up onto his right shoulder and kept it in place with one upraised

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arm, and that was all there was to it. It dipped a little at both ends, but any rolled-up rug would have. Cleopatra had gone to meet Caesar like this, he remembered. The present occupant was going to keep a blind date with her murderer — three or four hours after her own death.

Someone on the porch of the next cottage was strumming *Here Comes Cookie* on a ukulele as he stepped down to the sidewalk level with the body transverse to his own. He started up the street with it, with his head to one side to give it room on his shoulder. He came to the first street-light and its snowy glare picked him out for a minute, then handed him back to the gloom. He wasn't walking fast, just trudging along. He was doing just what he'd said he'd do: not thinking about it, letting his reflexes work for him.

"This is a rug," he kept repeating. "I'm taking it to the cleaners. People taking rugs to the cleaners don't go along scared of their shadows."

A rocking chair squeaked on one of the wooden platforms and a woman's nasal voice said: "Good evening, Larry. What on earth are you doing, trying to reduce?"

He showed his teeth in the gloom. "Gotta get this rug to the cleaners."

"My stars, at this hour?" she queried.

"I'll catch it if I don't," he said. "I was filling my fountain pen just now and I got ink all over it." He had deliberately stopped for a moment, set the thing down, shifted it to his other shoulder. He gave her another flash of his teeth. "See you later," he said, and was on his way again.

She gave a comfortable motherly laugh. "Nice young fellow," he heard her say under her breath to someone beside her. "But that stepmother of his —" The sibilant whispers faded out behind him.

So Doris was already getting a bad name among the summer residents — good. "Go to it!" he thought. "You'll have more to talk about in a little while."

Every porch was tenanted. It was like running the gauntlet. But he wasn't running, just strolling past like on any other summer evening. He saw two glowing cigarette ends coming toward him along an unlighted stretch of the sidewalk. As they passed under the next light he identified one — a girl he knew, a beach acquaintance, and her escort. He'd have to stop. He would have stopped if he only had a rug with him, so he'd have to stop now. The timing wasn't quite right though. Instead of coming up to them in one of the black stretches between lights, the three of them met face to face in one of the glaring white patches right at the foot of a street lamp.

"Hello old timer."

"Hello babe." He tilted his burden forward, caught it with both arms, and eased it perpendicularly to the pavement.

"Johnny, this is Larry." Then she said: "What in the world have you got there?"

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"Rug," he said. "I just got ink all over it, and I thought I could get it taken out before I get bawled out."

"Oh, they'll charge like the dickens for that," she said helpfully. "Lemme look, maybe I could do it for you, we've got a can of wonderful stuff over at our house." She put out her hand toward the top opening and felt one of the wedged-in cushions.

He could feel his hair going up. "Nah, I don't want to undo it," he said. "I'll never get it together again if I do." He didn't, however, make the mistake of pushing her hand away, or immediately trying to tip the thing back on his shoulders again. He was too busy getting his windpipe open.

"What's that in the middle there?" she said, poking her hand at the cushion.

"Sofa pillows," he said. "They got all spotted, too." He didn't follow the direction of her eyes in time.

"How come you didn't get it all over your hands?" she said innocently.

"I was holding the pen out in front of me," he said, "and it squirted all over everything." He didn't let a twitch get past his cuff and shake the hand she was looking at, although there were plenty of them stored up waiting to go to work.

Her escort came to his aid; he didn't like it because Larry'd called her "babe." "Come on, I thought you wanted to go to the movies —"

He started to pull her away.

Larry tapped his pockets with his free hand; all he felt was Doris's wrist-watch. "One of you got a cigarette?" he asked. "I came out without mine." The escort supplied him, also the match. Larry wanted them to break away first. They'd put him through too much, he couldn't afford to seem anxious to get rid of them.

"My, your face is just dripping!" said the girl, as the orange glare swept across it.

Larry said: "You try toting this on a warm night and see how it feels."

" 'Bye," she called back, and they moved off into the shadows.

He stood there and blew a long cloud of smoke to get into gear again. "That was the closest yet," he thought. "If I got away with that, I can get away with anything."

He got back under the thing again and trudged on, cigarette in mouth. The houses began to thin out; the paved middle of the street began to turn into the road that led out toward Pine Tree Inn, shorn of its two sidewalks. But it was still a long hike off, he wasn't even half-way there yet. He was hugging the side of the roadway now, salt marshes spiked with reeds on all sides of him as far as the eye could reach. A car or two went whizzing by. He could have got rid of her easy enough along here by just dropping her into the ooze. But that wasn't the answer, that wouldn't be making him pay for his party.

There was another thing to be considered though. Those occasional cars tearing past. Their headlights soaked him each time. It had been riskier back further where the houses were,

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maybe, but it hadn't looked so strange to be carrying a rug there. The surroundings stood for it. It was a peculiar thing to be doing this far out. The biggest risk of all might be the safest in the end; anything was better than attracting the attention of each separate driver as he sped by. A big rumbling noise came up slowly behind him, and he turned and thumbed it with his free hand.

The truck slowed down and came to a stop a foot or two ahead; it only had a single driver. "Get in," he said facetiously. "Going camping?" But it had been a rug back further, so it was still going to be a rug now, and not a tent or anything. Switching stories didn't pay. Only instead of going to the cleaners it would have to be coming from there now; there weren't any cottages around Pine Tree Inn.

"Nah," Larry said. "I gotta get this rug out to Pine Tree Inn, for the manager's office. Somebody got sick all over it and he had to send it in to be cleaned. Now he's raising hell, can't wait till tomorrow, wants it back right tonight."

He handed it up to the driver and the man stood it upright against the double seat. Larry followed it in and sat down beside it, holding it in place with his body. It shook all over when the truck got going and that wasn't any too good for the way it was rolled up. Nor could he jump down right in front of the inn with it, in the glare of all the lights and under the eyes of the parking attendants.

"Who do you work for?" said the driver after a while.

"Saroukian, an Armenian firm."

"What's matter, ain't they even got their own delivery truck?"

"Nah, we used to," said Larry professionally, "but we gave it up. Business been bad."

The ground grew higher as they got back inland; the marshes gave way to isolated thickets and clumps of trees. The truck ate up the road. "Got the time?" said Larry. "I'm supposed to get it there by nine thirty."

"It's about nine now," said the driver. "Quarter to when I started." Then he looked over at Larry across the obstacle between them. "Who d'ya think you're kidding?" he said suddenly.

Larry froze. "I don't get you."

"You ain't delivering that nowhere. Whatever it is, it's hot. You swiped it. You're taking it somewhere to sell it."

"How do you figure that?" said Larry, and curled his arm around it protectively.

"I wasn't born yestidday," sneered the driver.

Larry suddenly hauled it over his way, across his own lap, and gave it a shove with his whole body that sent it hurtling out the side of the truck. It dropped by the roadside and rolled over a couple of times. He got out on the step to go after it. "Thanks for the lift," he said. "I'll be leaving you here."

"All right, bud, if that's how you feel about it," agreed the driver.

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"Hell, it's not my lookout, I wasn't going to take it away from you —" Without slowing up he reached out and gave Larry a shove that sent him flying sideways out into the night.

Larry fortunately sailed over the asphalt roadbed and landed in the soft turf alongside. None too soft at that, but nothing was broken, his palms and knees were just skinned a little. He picked himself up and went back to where the rug was. Before he bent for it he looked around. And then his swearing stopped. Even this hadn't gone wrong, had come out right, very much right. He was so close to the inn that the reflection of its lights could be seen above the treetops off to one side. And the clump of pines would be even nearer, a five-minute walk from where he was.

But now, as he stooped over his grisly burden he was horrified to see that one of the cords had parted, that a pillow had fallen to the road and that the body had slid down till the forehead and eyes showed beneath the blonde hair that cascaded over the roadway. Larry looked up as a pair of approaching headlights floated around a distant corner. Hurriedly he worked the body back into position, shielding it with his own form from any curious glances that might be directed at him from the oncoming car. He had managed to get the pillow stuffed back in position and was retieing the cord as the car whizzed by without even a pause of interest. Larry heaved a sigh of relief and shouldering the load got going again. This time he kept away from the side of the road, going deeper and deeper among the trees.

The glare from the roadhouse grew stronger and kept him from losing his bearings. After a while a whisper of dance music came floating to him through the trees, and he knew he was there. He edged back a little closer toward the road again, until he could see the circular clearing in the pines just ahead of him. It was just big enough to hold a single car, but there wasn't any car in it. He sank down out of sight with what he'd carried all the way out here, and got to work undoing the cords that bound it. By the time he was through, the rug and the two pillows were tightly rolled up again and shoved out of the way, and the body of the woman who had died at five that afternoon lay beside him. He just squatted there on the ground next to it, waiting. In life, he knew, Doris had never been the kind of woman who was stood up; he wondered if she would be in death.

When it felt like half the night was gone — actually only about twenty minutes had passed — a sudden flash of blinding light exploded among the trees as a car turned into the nearby clearing from the road. He was glad he hadn't gone any nearer to it than he had. As it was he had to duck his head, chin almost touching the ground, for the far-flung headlight beams to pass harmlessly above him.

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They missed him by only two good feet. The lights swept around in a big arc as the car half turned, then they snapped out and the engine died. He couldn't see anything for a minute, but neither could whoever was in that car. Nothing more happened after that. When his eyes readjusted themselves he knew by its outline that it was the right car. Then there was a spurt of orange as the occupant lit a cigarette, and that gave his face away. Same face Larry had seen with Doris. It was the right man, too.

Larry stayed where he was, didn't move an inch. To do so would only have made every twig and pine needle around him snap and rustle. He couldn't do anything anyway while the man stayed there at the wheel; the first move would have to come from him. True, he might get tired waiting and light out again — but Larry didn't think he would. Not after coming all the way out here to get her. No one likes to be made a fool of, not even by a pretty woman. When she didn't show up he'd probably boil over, climb out and go up to the inn himself to see what was keeping her. It became a case of seeing which one of them would get tired waiting first. Larry knew it wasn't going to be himself.

The cushions of the roadster creaked as the man shifted his hips around. Larry could see the red dot of his cigarette through the trees, and even get a whiff of the smoke now and then. He folded his lapels close over his shirt-front and held them that way so the white wouldn't gleam out and give him away. The red dot went out. The leather creaked again. The man was getting restless now.

All of a sudden there was a loud honking blast, repeated three times. Larry jumped and nearly passed out. He was giving her the horn, trying to attract her attention. Then the door of the car cracked open, slammed shut again, and he was standing on the ground, swearing audibly. Larry got the head of the corpse up off the ground and held it on his lap, waiting. About a minute more now.

Scuffling, crackling footsteps moved away from the car and out onto the road. He stood there looking down it toward the inn. Larry couldn't see him but the silence told him that. No sign of her coming toward him. Then the soft scrape of shoe-leather came from the asphalt, moving away toward the inn. He was going up to the entrance to take a look in. Larry waited long enough to let him get out of earshot. Then he reared up, caught the body under the arms, and began to struggle toward the car with it, half carrying and half dragging it. The car was a roadster and Larry had known for a long time what he was going to do.

When he got up to the car Larry let the body go for a minute and climbed up and got the rumble-seat open. It was capacious, but he had a hard time getting the stiffened form into it. He put her in feet first, and she stuck out like a jack-in-the-box. Then he climbed up after her, bent

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her over double, and shoved her down underneath. He dug the wrist-watch with her name on it out of his pocket and tossed it in after her. Then he closed the rumble-seat and she was gone.

"You're set for your last joy-ride, Doris," he muttered. He would have locked the rumble, to delay discovery as long as possible, if he had had the key. He took the powder-compact with her snapshot under the lid and dropped it on the ground in back of the car. Let him deny that he'd been here with her! Then he moved off under the trees and was lost to sight.

A few minutes later he showed up at the door of the inn, as though he'd just come out from inside. The doorman was just returning to his post, as though someone had called him out to the roadway to question him. Larry saw a figure moving down the road toward the clump of pines he'd just come from. "What was his grief?" he asked, as though he'd overheard the whole thing.

"Got stood up," the doorman grinned. He went back inside and Larry went down to the edge of the road. The headlights suddenly flared out in the middle of the pines and an engine whined as it warmed up. A minute later the roadster came out into the open backwards, straightened itself. It stayed where it was a moment. A taxi came up to the inn and disgorged a party of six. Larry got in. "Back to town," he said, "and slow up going past that car down there."

The man in the roadster, as they came abreast of it, was tilting a whiskey bottle to his lips. Larry leaned out the window of the cab and called: "Need any help? Or are you too cheap to go in and buy yourself a chaser?"

The solitary drinker stopped long enough to tell Larry what to do, then resumed.

"Step on it," Larry told the driver, "I'm expecting a phone call."

When he let himself into the house once more, something stopped him before he was even over the threshold. Something was wrong here. He hadn't left that many lights turned on, he'd only left one dim one burning, and now — He pulled himself together, closed the door, and went forward. Then as he turned into the living room he recoiled. He came face to face with his father, who'd just got up out of a chair.

Weeks looked very tired, all in, but not frightened any more. "I took the next train back," he said quietly. "I'd come to my senses by the time I got there. What kind of a heel do you take me for anyway? I couldn't go through with it, let you shoulder the blame that way."

Larry just hung his head. "My God, and I've been through all that," he groaned, "for nothing!" Then he looked up quickly. "You haven't phoned in yet, or anything — have you?"

"No. I was waiting for you to come back. I thought maybe you'd walk over to the station-house with me. I'm not much of a hero," he admitted.

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Then he straightened up. "No use arguing about it, my mind's made up. If you won't come with me, then I'll go alone."

"I'll go with you," said Larry bitterly. "Might as well — I made a mess of it anyway. I see that now! It never would have held together. The whole thing came out wrong. I left the rug I carried her in, there under the trees. A dozen people saw me with it. I showed myself at the inn. I even told the taxi driver I was expecting a phone call. That alone would have damaged your alibi. How was I supposed to know you were going to call, if it wasn't a set-up? And last of all my prints are all over her powder-compact and her wrist-watch. A big help I turned out to be!" He gave a crooked smile. "Let's go. And do me a favor, kick me every step of the way getting there, will you?"

When they got to the steps of the headquarters building, they stopped and looked at each other. Larry rested his hand on his father's shoulder for a minute. "Wait here, why don't you," he said in a choked voice. "I'll go in and break it for you. That'll be the easiest way." He went in alone.

The sergeant on duty looked at him across the desk. "Well, young feller, what's your trouble?"

"The name is Weeks," said Larry, "and it's about Doris Weeks, my stepmother —"

The sergeant shook his head as though he pitied him. "Came to report her missing, is that it?" And before Larry could answer the mystifying question, "Recognize this?" He was looking at the wristwatch he'd dropped into the rumble seat less than an hour ago.

Larry's face froze. "That's hers," he managed to say.

"Yeah," agreed the sergeant, "the name's on it. That's the only thing we had to go by." He dropped his eyes. "She's pretty badly hurt, young feller," he said unwillingly.

"She's dead!" Larry exclaimed, gripping the edge of the desk.

The sergeant seemed to mistake it for apprehension and not the statement of a known fact. "Yeah," he sighed, "she is. I didn't want to tell you too suddenly, but you may as well know. Car smash-up only half an hour ago. Guy with her must have been driving stewed or without lights. Anyway a truck hit them and they turned over. He was thrown clear but he died instantly of a broken neck. She was caught under the car, and it caught fire, and — well there wasn't very much to go by after it was over except this wrist-watch, which fell out on the roadway —"

Larry said: "My father's outside, I guess I'd better tell him what you told me —" and he went weaving crazily out the doorway.

"It sure must be tough," thought the sergeant, "to come and find out a thing like that!"

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In bringing you Zona Gale's "Bridal Pond" we add still another Pulitzer Prize winner to the pages of EQMM, for Zona Gale was awarded that coveted honor in 1920 for her dramatization of her own splendid novel, MISS LULU BETT. *Like so many other preordained writers, Zona Gale started her literary career in childhood: at the age of seven she printed and bound her own first "book." An indefatigable worker, in good health and in bad, as a successful and famous author as well as an unknown, Zona Gale was always loyal to her personal writing credo. She has been called "a fellow realist with Sinclair Lewis and Theodore Dreiser," and it has been noted that* MISS LULU BETT *was exactly contemporaneous with* MAIN STREET *and "hardly less influential in establishing a new tone in fiction dealing with provincial America." But most critics found in her work a curious strain of mysticism — and it is that quality, on a high psychological level, that you will find in "Bridal Pond."*

BRIDAL POND

by ZONA GALE

THE Judge had just said "Case dismissed," and a sharp situation concerning cheese had thus become negligible when, before the next case on the calendar could be called, Jens Jevins came forward and said loudly:

"I wish to confess to the murder of my wife."

Now the court-room was still, the fierce heat forgotten and the people stupefied, for Jens Jevins was the richest farmer in the township. No one tried to silence or delay him.

He faced now the Judge and now the people, his face and neck the color of chicken skin, his tossed hair like a raveled fabric, his long right arm making always the same gesture. His clothes were good, and someone had pressed them.

"I planned to kill Agna for a long time. There was a time when for a week I slept with a pistol under my pillow, hoping for the strength to shoot her in her sleep. When I could tell by her breathing that it was time, I'd get up on my elbow and look at her, but I never had the courage to use the pistol on her — no, though I sat up in bed sometimes for half an hour with my finger on the trigger. Something would delay me — our dog would bark, or the kitchen clock would strike, or I would imagine my father shaking his head at me; and once she woke and asked me whether I had locked the porch door.

"Most of that week the room was as bright as morning, because the moon shone in, but as it rose later and

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hung higher, the room grew dark. And it seemed wrong to shoot Agna in the dark. Then I thought of a better plan."

The court-room was held as a ball of glass, in which black figures hang in arrested motion. The silence was not vacant, but rich and winey, like a rest in music. It was the rest in the tread of a giant, one step, one step, and men crushed and powerless. The Judge, the bailiff, the spectators were crushed and powerless, all with staring eyes, and their short breath caught through the mouth. Jens and Agna Jevins, they were known to all, and he so prosperous; and she a small complaining woman, who took prizes, with whom all must have talked on bright mornings, after she had lain asleep, close to death.

"At the south of our lot," Jens Jevins continued, and conversationally, quite quietly, as if he were talking to some surveyors, "there is a long slope and then a pond, where in my father's time they took out clay to make bricks. This place is not fenced; is separated from the highway by a few alders — some of you know," he said, with an air of surprise, remembering the spectators as living beings who had experienced his highway and the sight of his pond. "I would go down there sometimes on Spring evenings when the boys were catching frogs, and last week I went down, and they were catching frogs. And it was the night the Alexander boy fell in — well over his head he went, for the pond is above seven feet deep there, and sixteen farther out. I that was standing near was able to seize on him — I mention this because pulling him out put in my head the idea of what to do to Agna.

"So the next night I waited till late and I said to her that we might walk down and watch the boys catch frogs. She was glad to go and mentioned that I didn't often invite her to take evening walks any more, and we went down the slope. But I hadn't waited long enough, the boys were still there. She and I stood on the rim of the pond, and I edged her towards the place where the Alexander boy went in, and saw how easy it would be to send her down and keep her from climbing out. Only the boys were still there.

"It was dusk and the cars from town came down the highway and took the turn beyond our alders, and it looked as if they were all coming straight on to us, till they swung the corner. She says, 'What if one didn't see the turn and came crashing on to us?' and she shivered and said her shoulders were chilly, though the night was warm, and she wanted to go back to the house. So we went back and I read the evening paper aloud, about a young couple that had got married that day at Sun Prairie and had had a great doings. She said she wished we were starting over, and I said 'I don't' and went to bed.

"But in the night I woke up and thought of what she'd said. What if we were starting over? And what if I'd murdered her early, say, on the

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honeymoon? I saw that I couldn't have done it then. I wondered how I could do it now."

Now the Judge found his voice, and leaned down as if he were ill or drunken and said from his throat: "Why did you want to do it?"

Jens Jevins looked astonished. "I didn't *want* to do it," he said, "but there was thirty-seven years of it already and there might be twenty more."

Having answered, he continued:

"I began to see that what wasn't tragedy now would have been tragedy then. I thought of us driving through the country, if we'd been in the days of machines, like the Sun Prairie couple. Agna and me, you understand — and her young again. Her in the same blue dress, in the seat beside me. Me in a new suit, and shoes with the new not off the soles. Us talking and laughing, our valises stowed in the back. Going along the road. Along the road that swung round by our place, and turned the corner by the alder trees. Dark it might be, or maybe a fog would have come down. We'd be talking and laughing, and the road strange, and I'd miss the turn, and the car'd come skimming between the alders, and across the base of the slope, and making for the clay hole. Spite of all I could do, setting the brakes, on it'd come, heading for the clay hole. In the dark or maybe in the fog. And we wouldn't know we'd left the road, till I'd see a light from somewhere lapping on the pond, and then it'd be too late. Straight in and down — in and down. Nothing I could do. Agna in her blue dress. On the day of our wedding.

"But now it was thirty years and past, and twenty more to come. I woke her up. I says, 'I can't sleep. It's warm. Let's go down and walk out somewheres.' She laughed and grumbled some, but she went with me. She was always one to go with me. We put on little and went down the slope to the pond. It was deep dark — the light of a star was deep in the water. We heard the frogs and smelled the first wild grape. I took her to the place where the Alexander boy had slipped in and where it was hard for anybody to climb out. I waited a minute. Another car was coming along the road. 'When it turns the corner,' I thought, 'when it turns!' Its lights shone straight and strong, they blinded us, they came on and on, towards us. Agna says 'It's coming, it's coming! . . .' For the lights made no turn at the corner. The lights shot out from the alders. I could hear the talking and laughing in the car. In less than a flash of time, the car shook the ground around us, and went crashing down and down into the deep of the water. But first the lights of the water, or of the dashboard, or of the sky, or of heaven struck full on their faces that were still laughing. Well, there on that seat I tell you I saw me in my wedding suit that was new, and beside me Agna, that was young again.

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"There was a cry from Agna that was young and from me where I stood — and I saw what I'd done — reached back into the past and killed her that it was tragedy to kill. It was so that it had found me out. God had done it to me — just that way. I see it so. . . . All night I've walked in the woods, waiting for the time to tell. Now you know — now you know."

Jens Jevins stood head down, abruptly distracted, listless. The hundred voices in the room burst their silence. And after the first words, crude and broken, the women were saying: "Walked all night in the woods? But somebody has just pressed his clothes for him!"

Now the sound of running feet and the cries of men reached the room, and as these increased none knew whether to run down in the street or to stay in the court-room, where Jens Jevins might say something more. But now a great gasping voice cried from the stair: "Car gone into Jevins's clay hole!" . . . and immediately the room was emptied of all but those who must stay, and Jevins, who seemed not to have heard.

As one man, and he breathing his horror, the town of Tarnham ran down the highway, and did not take the turn, but kept straight on and flowed over the green and spangled slope and surrounded the Jevins pond. Some highway men, placing signs, had seen the corner of a top protruding from the water.

And now policemen and firemen were lifting from the water, slowly and with sickening lurchings and saggings, a black coupé, new by the signs, and within it, the seated figures of man and woman. And all about them, on sides and back of the car, were gay ribbon streamers, white and pink, and the lettering said: "Yes, we're just married." And such signs were also pasted in paper, and from them was dangling a water-soaked old shoe. A young chap, he was, with his hands still on the wheel and the emergency brake set, and a rose on his coat lapel; and his young bride, in her neat gown of blue, had her hands folded in her lap, over a little silver bag.

Now the sheriff came leading Jens Jevins and pushed through the crowd, and the people moved respectfully, for the tale of the court-room had not yet gone about. The sheriff and Jens Jevins went to the two figures, taken from the car and covered on the grass, and Jens said in a loud voice: "There we are!" And now he shouted in agony, "Agna, Agna! Jens!" and cast himself on the ground beside the two still figures.

The people were stupefied, not knowing what to feel, with the men and women from the court-room murmuring his story. Jens Jevins — and he so prosperous and known to them all. They had seen him yesterday, buying and selling. Could his wife have been in the car, too — the complaining woman, who took prizes?

No, for here she came walking down the slope from the house, wondering at the crowd gathered about their

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pond. She looked questioning, in her neat black dress and her striped scarf, and they made way for her; and a neighbor who had been in the courtroom cried: "Mrs. Jevins, Mrs. Jevins! The car that you saw last night go into the water had a bride and groom!"

But Agna Jevins said. "What car? I saw no car go into the water."

"What! You were not out here in the night and saw this car . . ."

"I?" cried Agna Jevins. "I was in bed the whole night, and Jens too. What car . . . ?"

They told her. She covered her eyes and said, "God forgive me, I heard a cry and thought of saying so to Jens, but he was sleeping soundly."

Jens and the sheriff moved toward her, and when he came up to her Jens began speaking softly: "All our friends, Agna, thinking of us through the night. And who could have imagined that we were spending the whole night so, side by side; and with the sunrise, we still so near to each other, saying nothing. Who could have told us in our early youth: 'You will rest on that night in a bed of ooze, and none shall know or care that you lie passionless and forgotten'? Who could have known that our wedding day and our death night would be one, because of a pond beyond alders, pleasant and secured? We have died with our dream and our happiness upon us, neither trouble nor weariness has touched us, nor the slow rust of unending days. I have no need to send you to your death, for we have died in the safety of our youth and not in the deep of days already dead. . ."

They led him to his house. Weeping, Mrs. Jevins said:

"It must have come on him all of a rush. For I pressed his clothes and got his breakfast and he went out of the house. And nothing had changed."

The legend grew that Jens Jevins had had a vision of that happening of the night, and that it had sent him off his head.

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Bechhofer Roberts — his full name is Carl Eric Bechhofer Roberts — was educated at St. Paul's School, London and Berlin Universities, and then, at Gray's Inn. Like so many authors, both British and American, Bechhofer Roberts studied to be an attorney-at-law, but drifted into other fields, and eventually became a writer. His widespread career has resulted in a remarkably versatile series of books, both under his real name and under the pseudonym of "Ephesian." After serving as a foreign correspondent in Russia and the Middle East, and as private secretary to Lord Birkenhead, Bechhofer Roberts wrote books on travel, literary criticism, spiritualism, criminology, and biographies of Winston Churchill, Lord Birkenhead, and Stanley Baldwin. Oh, yes, we omitted one classification. He also invented the character of A. B. C. Hawkes, and wrote at least three books of detective stories about him.

We say "at least three books of detective stories" because we know of only three titles; there are probably more. For a long time we thought the only book of A. B. C. short stories was one titled A. B. C. INVESTIGATES. *For years we tried to find a copy of this volume, scouring all the second-hand book markets we ever heard of and employing bookscouts all over the British Empire — but we have yet to locate a copy of the book. In the course of the search, however, as so often happens,* another *volume of A. B. C. shorts came to light, and from this "unknown" book we now bring you "The Lakdoo Dinner."*

THE LAKDOO DINNER

by BECHHOFER ROBERTS

"It's my opinion, Johnstone, that young Dr. Badling is preparing to murder his uncle! But what his plans are, and how we are to frustrate them, if at all, I have no idea whatever."

Thus did A.B.C. Hawkes address me one morning at breakfast in our Sussex cottage; and very much surprised I was by his remarks.

Of all our neighbors, I think he liked Colonel Badling best. The old gentleman used to call on us nearly every morning when we were down there and, after an enthusiastic if inexpert inspection of A.B.C.'s garden, he would sink into an armchair and chat pleasantly for half an hour. I believe he had had a fine Army career in his younger days and had twice been recommended for a Victoria Cross; moreover, he had shown real administrative ability in one of those military or semi-military governorships which abound on the fringes of the British Empire. But there was

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little of the ex-soldier about him except perhaps his upright bearing and strict sense of honor, for he had mellowed into a benevolent old gentleman with a definite distaste for everything pertaining to militarism. It amused me to hear him and A.B.C. engaged in one of their frequent arguments on the future of war.

The Colonel declared that armaments and armies were no longer necessary, and that peace could easily be secured, and order maintained, by the friendly cooperation of intelligent men of all nationalities. To which A.B.C. would reply teasingly that the proportion of intelligent men is so small in any country that it would be foolish to rely upon their influence in such matters: possibly, he suggested, a better way to prevent war might be to spread the knowledge of scientific warfare — poison gases, chemical bombs, disease carriers, and atom bombs — so widely that even the stupidest warmongers would hesitate before exposing themselves and their families to such perils.

The argument never ended, for the Colonel's sweet idealism and A.B.C.'s practical cynicism could not come to an agreement. I don't think either of them really wanted it to end, for it provided them for a long time with a constant excuse for conversation. But we began to see less of Colonel Badling after his nephew came to live with him.

Young Clive Badling was no favorite of ours, and he seemed to resent his uncle's friendship with us. The orphan son of the Colonel's younger brother, he was about twenty-five years old and had already a rather disreputable past.

So far as I gathered, he had been educated on his uncle's bounty and, after qualifying as a doctor, had been set up by the old gentleman in a London practice; but, instead of working hard, he had allowed his patients to drift away from him and, after being involved in an unsavory police-court case, had abandoned his practice and come down to Sussex as his good-natured uncle's guest.

His expression was furtive: he could look nobody in the face. He never seemed clean or tidy, and he utterly lacked his uncle's good nature. Everyone disliked him — the villagers, the snobs, the nobs, and even such nondescript residents as ourselves. If it had not been for the Colonel's popularity, the young doctor would probably have been boycotted. As it was, he was reluctantly accepted by us all and as reluctantly acknowledged our acquaintanceship. Even the Colonel realized the young man's unpopularity.

"I'm a lonely old man, Mr. Hawkes," he said one day to A.B.C., "but I hope I can help to give my nephew a little assistance in life. I don't want to give him any more money, because he only throws it away. But living down here with me will surely balance him a little, so that he'll become a better type of young fellow. Then, when I die, he'll have learned to make good use of what I

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leave him in my will. Meanwhile, it suits me to have a doctor about the house: I'm not so young as I used to be, and there are a good many running repairs needed for my old carcass. If you can help him to settle down, Mr. Hawkes, you'll be doing both him and me a great service."

But with the best will in the world, neither A.B.C. nor I could make Clive Badling popular or persuade him to relax his surly attitude towards his neighbors.

Then the old gentleman began to fail. I had a clue to his trouble one morning when, dozing in a hammock outside the window of A.B.C.'s study, I was awakened by angry voices.

"You ask me, doctor, why I want to see you?" my friend was saying.

"Yes, I do," replied a rasping voice, which I recognized as Clive Badling's. "I don't want to see you, and I don't want you interfering in my affairs."

"I'm sure you don't," A.B.C. retorted, "and that's exactly why I think it my duty to warn you. You may be interested to know that I've made some inquiries about your — shall I say, misadventure when in practice in London. In my view you were lucky to get off with only a wigging; if the coroner had been as clear-sighted as he was garrulous, something worse might have befallen you."

"Don't be a fool!" snapped the young man.

"I rarely am, my friend. So I warn you without further ado that, should any harm befall your uncle while you remain with him, I shall make it my business to demand a post-mortem."

"Do you think I'm a murderer?" Clive Badling sneered.

"Potentially, yes," said A.B.C. "I'm sure you are. No, don't dream of using violence on me; despite my seniority in years, I'm probably still a much better boxer than you'll ever be. So do be careful of your uncle's health, won't you? Or, by Paracelsus, I'll make you wish you'd never been born. Good day."

A door slammed and Clive Badling passed me to the gate, cursing under his breath.

It may have been a coincidence, but I noted that the Colonel's health quickly improved from that day, until he was as hale as ever.

Gradually the incident faded from my memory, and I began to think that my friend had been needlessly suspicious, for Clive Badling seemed to become more friendly and often accompanied his uncle when the old gentleman paid us a call. Still, there were rumors round the village that he was running into debt with bookmakers and moneylenders.

"That nephew of mine's a good doctor, Mr. Hawkes," the Colonel announced one morning, when he visited us alone. "He's discovered at last what my trouble is; it's my liver! He's put me on a diet. Look at me! I haven't been so fit for a dozen years. I tell you, Mr. Hawkes, if ever you've anything the matter with you, you might do worse than consult Clive."

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"What is the diet?" A.B.C. asked, disregarding the end of our guest's remarks.

"Oh, it's ridiculously simple. I'm not to eat anything fried or made with eggs, and I mustn't drink any wine or spirits. That's all — but it's a bit of a strain, I don't mind telling you." The old gentleman smiled. "You see, if there's one thing I like better than another, it's a jolly good omelette and a glass of port to follow; but, by Jove, Mr. Hawkes, it's worth losing them to feel as well as I do now!"

"Is that the whole treatment, Colonel!" I asked.

"Well, Clive's giving me some injections, too," the old gentleman replied. "Strychnine, I suppose. They've certainly bucked me up wonderfully."

I threw a glance at A.B.C., but he ignored me. "I've often wondered," my friend remarked, "why more Englishmen don't give up port and drink strychnine instead — in safe doses, of course. It's so much healthier and, to my mind, the flavor isn't much inferior. After all, no Englishman likes a sweet wine, and yet he swills port, which is the sweetest of all."

The Colonel laughed. "One either is or isn't a port drinker, Mr. Hawkes. If you are — and I expect you are, despite what you say — you'll agree with me that port's infinite variety is the secret of its charm. One champagne is very like another, or they differ within narrow limits, but the varieties and vintages of port are a world in themselves. In my case, too, I've another reason for feeling well disposed towards port. Have I ever told you about our Lakdoo dinner?"

"Your what dinner?" I asked.

"Lakdoo, Mr. Johnstone, is a village on the borders of Tibet. I'm not surprised that you've never heard of it, for very few people have. But I'm never likely to forget it. You see, I was nearly wiped out there thirty years ago."

"Be reminiscent, my dear Colonel," A.B.C. cried. "Tell us how you cheated death."

The old gentleman settled down in his easy chair and told us the whole story.

"Lakdoo is a village of twenty houses, and two hundred smells, all nasty," the Colonel began, "and it's up a valley not very far past Gilgit, full of the nastiest rocks and the coldest snow-streams I've ever come across. In the daytime it's almost too hot to breathe, with the sun streaming down on you from directly overhead, while at nightfall the temperature drops well below freezing and there's a wind that cuts like a scythe. An unpleasant climate, but not so unpleasant as were the local inhabitants! And they were not so bad as their neighbors in the next valleys, but we weren't to know that.

"You see, two other subalterns and I happened to land up in Lakdoo on leave, looking for bear, and the very first night we were there, all our carriers and shikaris cleared out — they must have had a warning — and we found that a party of tribesmen

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had taken cover on a hill overlooking the village and were only waiting for us to come out to pick us off.

"We were lodged in a stone fort a little away from the rest of Lakdoo, and every time we opened the gate, they took pot-shots at us. The worst of it was that we only had a couple of cans of water and there was a four hundreds yards' climb down to the river to get any more. So things looked damnably unhealthy for us. We couldn't get out, and the tribesmen didn't care to try to come in; they just sat down and waited for us to run out of water.

"We did our best, but the two cans couldn't last long in that heat. To cut a long story short, we found ourselves one fine day with empty cans and only a bottle of port among us, and dying of thirst. We'd brought the port with us, intending to celebrate our first bear with it. But now that we were hunted instead of hunting, we decided to drink it right away and die fighting. It tasted pretty good, I can tell you, and, when it was finished, we shook hands and got ready to clear out as soon as darkness came. We hoped to fight our way back to Gilgit — not that there was much hope!

"Well, gentlemen, the fact that I'm sitting here proves that something unexpected happened. As a matter of fact, somebody back in Gilgit must have got wind of our trouble, for, just as we were opening the gate to make our sortie, there was a terrific shindy on the hillside and another tribe wandered along and carved up our besiegers, rescuing us. The other two subalterns and I swore that, ever afterwards so long as we lived, we'd try to dine together on the anniversary of that last evening and drink a bottle of that identical port. We've been lucky. We're still alive and fairly fit; one of us is a General, another is in the Cabinet, and I'm here. But you realize what it'll mean to me if I can't have my share of the port at our next Lakdoo dinner."

A.B.C. smiled at Colonel Badling's conclusion. "A terrible predicament," he said.

"It is indeed," said our visitor, gloomily shaking his head.

We did not see him again for a few days, but during that time our housekeeper reminded us of his new diet.

Apologizing at breakfast for serving us sausages instead of eggs with our bacon, she said, "It's that young Dr. Badling. He come round to my husband this morning, he did, and bought up all the eggs we got, and my husband never knowed that I hadn't any in the house here for you. He's been buying a terr'ble lot of eggs lately, has Dr. Badling."

I looked at A.B.C. "Why on earth do the Badlings want so many eggs, if the Colonel isn't allowed to eat them?" I asked him. He shrugged his shoulders without answering.

A day or two later our housekeeper brought up the subject again. "That young Dr. Badling, sir," she told my friend, "is fair ruining my hens, he is. He's been throwing ever so many egg-

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shells into our hen-run, and, of course, that'll ruin my hens."

"I thought eggshells were good for hens," I said. "Makes them lay eggs with good, hard shells, doesn't it?"

"A little shell, well broken up, don't do them no harm, sir," replied the woman, "but if they gets big lumps of shells to eat, same as Dr. Badling's thrown into my run, why, it encourages 'em to eat their own eggs. And that's what they will do. I told young Dr. Badling so. 'If you wants to buy all them eggs from me,' I says, 'I shan't be able to let you have them if you makes my hens eat their own eggs.'"

Next time the Colonel called on us A.B.C. asked him if he had changed his diet.

"No, Mr. Hawkes, I haven't," he replied, "and I may tell you that I'm feeling better and better every day. Don't you think I'm looking well? I haven't tasted egg in any form for the past month, nor eaten anything fried or drunk anything worth drinking. But it's worth it, isn't it? Look at me! Fit as a fiddle!"

Then he sprang a surprise on us. His nephew, he said, needed a change and was going off on a West Indies cruise, which would last a month. Rather than stay alone in their house, the Colonel asked us if we would allow him to be our guest during Dr. Badling's absence.

"But what about your treatment, Colonel, your injections?" A.B.C. asked.

"Oh, Clive's practically finished with them now," the old gentleman explained. "He says I shan't need any more while he's away. So long as I stick to my diet, he says, I shall be all right."

So it was arranged that the Colonel should stay with us during his nephew's journey. The day before he arrived, our housekeeper brought us some information which, though we were careful not to let her suspect this, caused us considerable uneasiness. She said that young Badling had promised several people in the neighborhood — including a bookmaker at Coppsmere with whom he had run up a very large bill — to pay them in full the moment he returned from his cruise. Then it was that A.B.C. made the observation which I have already quoted.

"It's my opinion, Johnstone," he said, as soon as the housekeeper had left the room, "that young Dr. Badling is preparing to murder his uncle!"

He pointed out how convenient it would be for the nephew if the death occurred during his absence on the cruise and, even more, if the Colonel were our guest at the time.

"What can he be intending?" I asked. "If he's given his uncle some slow poison, a post-mortem, with which you've threatened young Badling, will undoubtedly reveal it. And he can't have hired anybody to bump off the Colonel, as if we were living in Mexico or Seattle. And I presume that, apart from eggs, fried food, and strong drink, our guest will eat and

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drink the same things as ourselves."

A.B.C. grimly agreed. "And yet I'm as certain as I can be of anything that there's dirty work on hand. Well, it's up to us to frustrate it, and the first thing we can do is to make certain that the young doctor *does* sail. That, at least, ought to relieve us from the necessity of watching for direct attacks on our guest's life."

A message from Southampton a day or two later proved that Clive Badling had really left on the cruise and, while A.B.C. took the precaution of instructing the purser to let him know if the youth broke his journey at any port from which he might return secretly to England, I felt sure that there was no chance of this happening.

Clive Badling was playing a deeper game — if he was playing one at all.

A fortnight passed without any incident suggesting that the Colonel's life was threatened. He fitted easily in our daily round and when A.B.C. had to go up to London, I always stayed behind to guard the old gentleman. But I had no idea what I was guarding him against; nor, I am certain, had A.B.C. There were moments when we thought that our suspicions of the nephew must be groundless; still, we decided not to leave any opening for foul play.

When, at the end of this fortnight, the annual Lakdoo dinner fell due, at which the Colonel and the two other survivors of the affair at the fort were to celebrate their escape, A.B.C. and I cajoled him into allowing us to relieve him of the duty of ordering the menu — a duty which devolved on him every three years.

"We can thus make certain, Johnstone," A.B.C. said to me, "that there's no monkeying with his food. Moreover, since the dinner is to take place, as usual, at the Café Napoleon, I'll make it my business to instruct my friend the manager to detail his best cook and most trustworthy waiters to prepare and serve the meal. I will thus insure that the food shall be of such a nature that no harm can possibly befall Colonel Badling. It is true that he insists on sharing the bottle of port which is the main feature of this annual reunion; but there again I'll make sure that the excellent cellars of the Café Napoleon are secure against any attempt to tamper with the wine."

"But do you suppose that the dinner provides any opportunity for Dr. Badling to harm his uncle?" I asked.

"Eggs, my boy! Eggs! That's where the danger might lie," was A.B.C.'s answer.

I begged him to explain.

"It's mere conjecture on my part," he went on, "but, frankly, I can see no other possibility. Let us suppose that Dr. Badling has used all those dozens of eggs which he bought from our housekeeper to produce a solution with which he had injected his uncle. We know that no eggs have been eaten in that house since the Colonel went on his diet; yet his nephew bought them in large quantities and has certainly made some

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use of them. Suppose that he's used them for the injections."

"What then?" I asked.

"You're probably aware, my friend, that certain people are naturally sensitive to various foodstuffs, such as crab, and, if they eat these, they immediately come out with nettlerash or some such complaint. This abnormal sensitiveness is a well-known medical phenomenon."

"Yes, my brother-in-law gets ill if he eats strawberries," I said.

"Exactly," A.B.C. commented. "Of course, it's possible to render such people insensitive to the effects by giving them a course of suitable doses of an extract of the noxious substance. If, for example, you normally get nettlerash from eating crab, doses of crab-extract will make you immune."

"That's all very well," I said, "but I find it difficult to imagine that Dr. Badling has been trying to make his uncle immune from the bad effects of eating eggs by giving him doses of egg-extract. I thought we were agreed that, if possible, he wished to take his uncle's life, not to preserve it."

"One thing at a time," Hawkes said. "The treatment works both ways. Not only can you render a sufferer immune by doses of the extract, but you can also do the opposite. You can give a number of very minute doses of any substance to a normal person and thus render him so sensitive that, if he exposes himself to the smallest trace of that substance, he'll have a very severe and possibly a fatal reaction."

I stared at him. "You mean that this young man has injected his uncle with minute doses of egg so that, if the Colonel eats an egg, he'll die?"

"No need to eat a whole egg; it would be enough for the Colonel, if our suspicion is correct, to swallow even the smallest fragment of an egg or anything prepared with eggs."

"But in that case," I argued, "why should Dr. Badling have warned him so urgently against eating eggs or anything prepared with eggs? It doesn't make sense, A.B.C., does it? Suppose, for example, the Colonel does eat an egg, and dies — well, we shouldn't have much difficulty in proving that his nephew murdered him, should we?"

"That's the difficulty," A.B.C. agreed. "I've never before met a prospective murderer who warned his victim and his victim's friends of the means he intended to adopt. Still, I sense danger. You may be quite certain that I'll insist that no eggs shall appear in any shape or form on the menu of this Lakdoo dinner. And, to make assurance doubly sure, I've persuaded the Colonel to let the dinner take place in one of the public rooms of the restaurant, where I shall book an adjoining table for yourself. Unfortunately, I have to lecture that evening to the Royal Society."

"You don't think that the port is the danger?" I asked. "Perhaps it's unwise for the Colonel to drink it after he's been teetotal so long."

"So long?" sneered A.B.C. "Do you call a couple of months long? No,

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if the port isn't tampered with, its alcoholic qualities ought to be quite harmless to so seasoned a drinker as our friend."

"Possibly young Badling's arranged with one of the others to do the old man in," I suggested. "Or he's got hold of a waiter."

"Goodness only knows!" Hawkes struck his forehead with his hand. "Where *does* the danger lie? I can't see it, yet my instinct tells me that it exists!"

Naturally we said nothing to Colonel Badling about our fears. When the day of the Lakdoo dinner came, we drove him up to town and, after Hawkes went off to the Royal Society to give his lecture, I accepted the old gentleman's invitation to meet his friends. The Cabinet Minister turned out to be a tall, thin individual with a bald head, an abnormally high forehead and collar, and the most pompous possible flow of speech. He talked to us almost without ceasing for half an hour, telling us his personal views about the foreign situation and the difficulty of persuading his colleagues in the Cabinet to take his advice. I felt certain that this man at least was not to be suspected of a share in any attempt on the Colonel's life; he was far too self-centered to be a willing participant in murder, while nobody but a lunatic would dream of trying to use him as an unconscious confederate — he would certainly want to talk at the moment when he ought to do the job!

The other Lakdoo survivor, a pleasant red-faced General, was much too slow on the uptake to be of any assistance, conscious or unconscious, to a murderer.

As it turned out, I had known the waiters for years; they were all above suspicion. What is more, the manager beckoned me aside and whispered to me that he had personally made sure that A.B.C.'s instructions not to use any egg in any form in cooking the meal had been carried out.

At last the three old gentlemen sat down to dine, and I took my seat at a neighboring table. The annual Lakdoo dinner began. I am bound to say that, sitting there and watching them, with the horrible feeling that murder was lurking somewhere near, I had no appetite to eat my own meal.

A.B.C. had ordered them an excellent dinner, and they evidently were enjoying it. Try as I might, I could not see any loophole for an attempt on Colonel Badling's life. The melon, the *borscht*, the sole, the woodcock, the ice, and the ripe Stilton cheese — they suggested indigestion possibly, but not poison. Then the great moment of the anniversary arrived, and the manager himself brought in a decanter of port, the same vintage as that bottle which these three men had drunk so many years before in the little Tibetan fort, while they waited for death.

The Colonel happened to catch my eye as the waiter served him, and he raised his glass in greeting to me. The three old gentlemen solemnly

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shook hands and, with enormous solemnity, held their glasses to the light, admired the color of the old port, and prepared to take the first ceremonious sip.

At this moment the dreadful thing happened for which I had been waiting. The moment the Colonel swallowed the first drop of port, he seemed to catch his breath and the glass dropped from his hand, splashing his shirt-front and the tablecloth. His face grew livid; he gave an inarticulate cry and slumped over in his seat, unconscious.

I jumped to my feet, careless of the damage I did to the plates and glasses on my table, and rushed towards him.

Quick as I was, somebody was before me and I saw A.B.C., his coat-tails still flying in the breeze of his hurried entry into the room, bending over the prostrate man. In my friend's hand was a syringe, and I saw him place it against the Colonel's arm and press it.

Soon, to my enormous relief, the Colonel seemed to come out of his swoon. His breathing became normal and before very long he was able to sit up. With the assistance of his friends and the waiters we led him to a small room on an upper floor of the restaurant and, watched by A.B.C. and by a doctor who happened to be dining in the place, he came round completely.

When at last he was himself again, A.B.C. laid a friendly hand on his arm and addressed him softly, but not so softly that we others could not hear what he said. "My dear Colonel," he began, "I have to make a rather distressing statement to you. I fear that your nephew, to whom you have been so kind in so many ways, has tried to murder you."

The poor old gentleman protested, but A.B.C. continued inexorably, "I know that you're reluctant to hear an ill report of anybody, least of all of Dr. Badling, but I am perfectly certain of what I say. I must also tell you that I warned your nephew some time ago that, should any accident befall you, I should make it my business to investigate the circumstances and, if suspicion pointed to him, to see that he was brought to book. I've no doubt whatever that what I said frightened him: you may recall that you recovered rather quickly from the illness from which you were then suffering. But, assuming — as I did and do — that he has designs on your life, it seemed clear to me that he would still endeavor to find some means of killing you without the danger of being detected. I have now discovered his method.

"He is at present, as we know, many thousands of miles away. And he has been gone a fortnight; consequently, he must have laid his plans before he left. I'll tell you quite simply, Colonel, what I think he did; he injected a solution of egg into your veins, in order that the mere contact with egg in any shape or form would be sufficient to poison you."

"But I've eaten no eggs since he went," the Colonel protested.

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"Naturally," said A.B.C. "Had you died after eating an egg or anything prepared with eggs, it wouldn't have been very difficult to guess what had happened. He was subtler than that.

"He knew that you would drink your usual glasses of port at this annual Lakdoo dinner. I knew it too, but I confess that the significance of the fact escaped me until I was in the middle of a discourse to the Royal Society this evening. My subject being the future development of television, I can't quite see why I should have hit on the solution of the puzzle during my speech: my subconscious mind, however, did so and that's why I disconcerted my learned brethren by dashing from the rostrum and driving here at full speed."

"But the syringe, A.B.C.?" I said.

"Oh, I've had that by me for weeks now, ever since the Colonel came to stay with us. It's filled with adrenalin, which acts as a specific against all forms of anaphylactic shock, which, Colonel, is the technical name given to the results of contact with a substance to which one may be, or may be made, sensitive — in your case, eggs."

"I've eaten no eggs, no eggs in any form," the Colonel repeated.

"That's where my subconscious mind came in so handy," said A.B.C. "It suddenly reminded me — while, I repeat, I was addressing the Royal Society on a very different subject — that most shippers of port *clarify that beverage with eggshells!* This remote contact was sufficient to have killed you, thanks to your charming nephew's previous injections into you of a solution of egg."

Did you—

Get Him Out Of This?

(Solution to puzzle on inside front cover)

Snip Carton mesmerizes cobra into a coma by playing on his mouth organ. Then he tears his shirt into strips, knots each strip end to end, prises a brick out of pit wall with Black Jack's jimmy, and ties one end of shirt rope to half a brick. He prises further bricks out of wall to give foot- and hand-holds enabling him to climb side of pit. Near the top, he throws brick end of rope over the small branch from which bat-laden twig stems.

He pulls small branch towards him until he can grasp the main branch, which he pulls down. When the big branch provides sufficient spring, he gives himself a strong shove-off and the branch lifts him clear of pit and waiting tigers. He swings from tree to ground out of tigers' range, and escapes.

The tarantula spiders? Snip Carton knows that despite their sinister reputation, they, like bats, are not at all lethal.

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OLD BEETLE'S CRIME

by ALEX. BARBER

SOMEONE in a sportive moment had called him Old Beetle, and the name had stuck because it was so apt. The shell-like back of his ancient frock-coat, the unobtrusive way he had with him, his quick gliding movement about the office on shuffling feet that seemed scarcely to leave the floor — all these things fitted in with the idea of a harmless old insect.

Harmless. Anyone knowing the man would have felt that adjective rise instinctively to his lips in speaking of him. So dull — deadly dull — in his habits, and so self-effacing in all his drab clerkly life was Old Beetle. No one had ever seen him roused to anger. Even the thoughtless, irritating lapses on the part of the juniors under him only drew from him the milkiest of reproofs.

Untold years had passed since first he had entered the solid business house of Messrs. Pattinson, Gable, and Pattinson, Valuers, Estate Agents, and Auctioneers. Youngsters had come into the office, stayed a while, and then burst out again to free themselves from the stale, musty, cheesy atmosphere that lurked potently in the place. Old Man Pattinson had never been able to move with the times, and his iron rule had done all that was humanly possible to prevent the flood-waters of modernity from trickling under the stout doors of his "House." Ambition, enterprise, the fire of young enthusiasms, were damped daily. Naturally, this had its sure reaction on the firm's finances, but Messrs. Pattinson, Gable, and Pattinson never seemed to mind. As for the paid staff, they were a constantly changing factor — with the single exception of Old Beetle.

Finson, who hadn't stayed long in the office, permitted himself a little sage summing-up to the obediently attentive office-boy.

"Old Beetle," he remarked scornfully. "He's waited for the mildew to settle on him. One of the maggots in this antique cheese, that's what he is. Didn't have the pluck to break away when he was younger, I daresay. Queer old fellow. Reckon he never did anybody much harm — or himself much good."

Old Beetle heard that. He had heard a great many things of the same brand — about himself. The acoustic properties of the old-fashioned offices were a trifle odd, and in addition he had very sharp ears.

Those comments of Finson's made him chuckle quietly to himself, lean fingers plucking at his thin white beard, alert eyes narrowed. All that afternoon, as he sat humped over his desk, he bathed in ironical delight.

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Finson was a flashy young fool, he mused — not at all bitterly. One of these post-war puppies with a caustic tongue and no knowledge of human nature.

"Old Beetle . . . never did anybody much harm." That was the stupid, ignorant phrase he had used. And he believed it. If in the full strength of that faith he were suddenly told the truth, what would he do? Old Beetle could imagine the stark consternation flooding into Finson's pale, shallow face — could picture the leaping horror, mingling with disbelief, that must rise to his eyes. There were deeps in the hearts of men that Finson and his kind had never in their wildest dreams plumbed.

"No imagination. Poverty of insight," muttered Old Beetle, pausing in his work on a ledger.

In some subtle way it annoyed him to feel that no one — not a soul around — thought him capable of strong emotions or fierce wild acts.

That night, and for many nights following, he lay awake and ran over in his mind the course of a certain secret crime.

So easy it had been, he reflected. No fuss. Not even any need for preparation. For years he had been the constant companion of that cheery young chap, Douglas Harrington, and when he had been found dead in his rooms, there had been no shadow of suspicion to fall in the right quarter.

"Almost too simple," Old Beetle told himself, twisting over in bed, hot and restive, with his bony hands clutching hold of the counterpane. "A penholder, wasn't it? Yes — a penholder. And they never thought of me. Who'd dream of suspecting Harrington's best friend, anyway?" He laughed unevenly, and then fell silent for a time, while the clock on the mantel ticked impatiently, like the sound of far-off hurrying feet.

One thing was perplexing him. He could remember — even after all these years — every detail of the crime, and even something of the appearance of young Harrington's features. The penholder, for instance, stood before his mind's eye in slim vividness. But one important factor eluded him. Queer. He could turn his thoughts successfully in all directions — except one. It struck him, even in his puzzlement, that his memory was a bit like a watch with one hour-mark missing, and the fancy tickled him. He laughed in the still dark of the bedroom. Like a watch with one hour-mark missing! And yet it was a trifle eerie. That one essential thing simply wouldn't obey his summons, and be ranked up with the rest.

Why had he murdered James Douglas Harrington? Why?

Search as he would, no shred of a reason came to solve that frightening mystery.

From that time, as the drab days went by, he found the great query looming larger before him. He even caught himself writing it down on the back of a receipt form.

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"Won't do," he quavered, with a sharp glance round of fear. "It'll all come out if they find anything like this about."

He must keep a tight rein on himself. After these long working years of immunity, he would be a colossal fool to betray his secret of blood, he told himself.

James Douglas Harrington had been dead too long for any ordinary factor to reveal his murderer. He mustn't let age pull on his imagination like this. Getting on. That was his trouble. No fool like an old fool. But he wasn't going to give himself away. If dead men told no tales, why should he speak of 'em? Madness, that would be.

Nevertheless, it *was* queer how that big point always evaded the seeking fingers of memory. He tried to get at it by a calm statement of the facts, sitting on his bed with a purple dressing-gown folded about him in thick rolls and hummocks.

"I've killed him. With a penholder. How many years back? A long while, anyhow — never mind. Well. What then? What was I thinking of? With a penholder, it was. Of course. Wasn't there something else?"

He shivered, and stared at unseen things beyond the walls of the coldly moonlit room. Somehow his thoughts seemed to elude any attempt to marshal them in order. Did pretty well as they liked. Funny thing, that. Did pretty well as they liked. Now why should they? That penholder. James Douglas Harrington. Years upon years ago. In another life — almost.

Then at last his muddled intelligence seized on the vital pith of the problem.

"Why? That was it. Why did I do it — all those years ago? Decent fellow, young Harrington. I spoiled his chances for him, didn't I? And they never suspected. Just a penholder. Queer how things turn out in this jumbled old world. Dead. Him. It might have been the other way round — me dead, him alive now. You can't make these things out, anyway. I got him. With a penholder. But that wasn't all. The penholder was How. What was Why? That's it. What was Why, if the penholder was How? Like a conundrum, ain't it? A conundrum."

Awkwardly he scrabbled into bed, curled up on his side, and lay staring into invisible distances. Presently a chuckle cut the silence. Then another.

"What was Why? That's beaten me. What was Why? The reason behind it. Whacks me. Whacks me."

Weeks sauntered past, and still Old Beetle's puzzle gave no signs of solution. It mattered a lot now. It intruded more and more into his work. In fact, the austere head of Pattinson, Gable, and Pattinson's had occasion to speak to the submissive Mr. Gable about it. Old Beetle's behavior had attracted attention. Evidently he was "getting past it." Pension, service, loyalty were words that played a part in old Pattinson's talk with the sober Mr. Gable.

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Old Beetle knew nothing of this side of the affair. His own perplexing mystery filled his little world of thought. He realized that he had murdered Harrington, but somehow that didn't matter much. Years ago. Let it rest. But his motive — that counted. He had got to find it out. Must. There was a satisfying answer to that ceaseless question, if only he could stumble on it or thresh it out of the meaningless heap of facts that his mind held.

Why had he killed James Douglas Harrington?

Why?

Curious thing, how one point could run away from a man like a fear-stricken live creature. Perhaps the reason didn't want to be known. This new theory filled him with sudden alarm. If Why was really unwilling to be found, it made the whole search tenfold harder.

"Get it some day," Old Beetle murmured. "Stick to it — that's the notion. Stick to it. The penholder did it. Yes. Then there must have been a cause. No, not a cause — that was the penholder. A reason. No other word. Reason. What was it? If the penholder was How, what was Why? Answer me that. Don't know? Nonsense. Nonsense, I say! Well, then — stick at it till you do. Bound to get it some day. Bound to."

Then, just as he was pulling off his socks one night, the brilliant inspiration came to him. The method of finding out that elusive Why. With a happy chuckle he began to draw on his sock again, but in time he remembered that nothing could be done so late. He must wait until the morning. Then he would know. It was a gorgeous idea, and the only wonder about it was that he hadn't thought of it before.

The police. They would know. Or if they didn't actually know, they could find out. Their job. Paid for it, they were — to find out things for people. He'd simply go to them and let them get on with it. Have to confess, of course, but he didn't mind that. No. The main object was to find out what that Why was. Of course.

The next morning saw Old Beetle carrying out his splendid notion. He knew where he could find a policeman, not far from the office, and then he would soon know. Up to the young constable he shuffled, and spoke in nervously eager tones. After the first slight shock of surprise the officer seemed to understand perfectly. He took Old Beetle along to the station, where he found a bald-headed man in uniform sitting behind a low table. Old Beetle patiently repeated what he had said to the constable.

"I want to confess to the murder of James Douglas Harrington. I did it with a penholder. Years ago."

"Eh?" Glances were exchanged by the youthful constable and the bald-headed man at the table. "I see. What was it, again?"

"James Douglas Harrington. I killed him years ago. With a penholder."

"Quite so."

The bald-headed man's tone was

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gentle, soothing. He gave orders, pressed his broad thumb on bells, made notes, and asked questions. Old Beetle was glad he had taken this step. Soon now he would solve the mystery of that everlasting Why.

"How long ago did you do it?" queried the man at the table, after sitting a while in silence, apparently waiting for the return of the constable, who had departed mysteriously.

Old Beetle thought hard. "Forty-three years," he said presently.

He made no attempt to break the silence that followed. Minutes ticked by. Then footsteps approached.

It was the young constable back.

"Well?" said the bald-headed man at the table, in an undertone.

"I've seen Mr. Pattinson, sir," whispered the young constable, bending to bring his lips close to the other's ear. "Says he's not particularly surprised. Been behaving very queerly for some time. They'd thought of pensioning him off. He's been with the firm forty-three years in March."

The bald-headed man started.

"Forty-three years, did you say?"

"That's it, sir. Quite a character. Old Beetle, they call him. A record period of service, he's got. One of the juniors told me he can't imagine how anyone could stick the place for all that time. Like burying yourself, he said it was."

The bald-headed man shot a quick glance across at Old Beetle, who was sitting still on his chair, perfectly happy now, a smile curving his mouth.

"Forty-three years. Like burying yourself," murmured the bald-headed man, very thoughtfully. "And he's sure he murdered someone forty-three years ago. With a penholder, of all things — *with a penholder*. . . . What did you say his name was?"

The constable bent down again.

"Old Beetle, they call him," he said quietly. "But his real name's Harrington — James Douglas Harrington!"

NEXT MONTH . . .

ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE will bring you:

Wilbur Daniel Steele's DUST TO DUST
Barry Perowne's FORGET-ME-KNOT
Jacques Futrelle's ?
Roy Vickers's THE MILLION-TO-ONE CHANCE
Melville Davisson Post's THE FORGOTTEN WITNESS

We also offer you another *EQMM* "first story" — *I. J. Jay's* THE GEWGAW MURDER, together with a special tribute to Edgar Allan Poe on the hundredth anniversary of his death.

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Are you interested in what might be called "the criminological coincidence of names"?

Do you believe that names have a subtle and pervasive influence — the ability to attract mates, to reincarnate themselves, or to have a perpetual life?

Take, for example, the name of that "master of the art of anonymity in the first person," that immensely popular short-story writer whose tales of Broadway banditti and Gotham gunmen have left an indelible mark in the history of Bagdad-on-the-Hudson — we mean, of course, the late and beloved Damon Runyon.

It is curious how his name — both ends of it — has come to have a related significance in other branches of bloodhounding; and it is a double coincidence that both ends have become linked with Dashiell Hammett. For consider: an actor named Damon played the radio part of Hammett's Thin Man, and the name of Hammett's Fat Man is Runyon.

And talking of names, here is the sad story of a character named Gentleman George, and the even sadder story of some characters named Mr. and Mrs. Samuel B. Venus and a 22-carat fink named Count Tomaso.

CEMETERY BAIT

by DAMON RUNYON

ONE pleasant morning in early April a character by the name of Gentleman George wakes up to find himself in a most embarrassing predicament.

He wakes up to find himself in a cell in the state penitentiary at Trenton, N. J., and while a cell in a state penitentiary is by no means a novelty to George, and ordinarily will cause him no confusion whatever, the trouble is this particular cell is in what is known as the death house.

Naturally, George is very self-conscious about this, as it is only the second time that he ever finds himself in such a house, and the first time is so far back in his youth that it leaves scarcely any impression on him, especially as he is commuted out of it in less than sixty days.

Well, George sits there on the side of the cot in his cell this pleasant April morning, thinking what a humiliating circumstance this is to a proud nature such as his, when all of a sudden he remembers that on the morrow he is to be placed in Mister Edison's rocking chair in the room adjoining his cell, and given a very severe shock in the seat of his breeches.

On remembering this, George be-

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comes very thoughtful, to be sure, and sighs to himself as follows: Heigh-ho, heigh-ho, heigh-ho. And then he sends for me to come and see him, although George is well aware that I have no use for penitentiaries, or their environs, and consider them a most revolting spectacle.

In fact, I have such a repugnance for penitentiaries that I never even glance at them in passing, because I am afraid that peepings may be catchings, but of course in a situation such as this I can scarcely deny the call of an old friend.

They let me talk to George through the bars of his cell, and naturally I am somewhat perturbed to observe him in this plight, although I can see that his surroundings are clean and sanitary, and that the hacks seem kindly disposed toward him, except one big doorknob who is inclined to be somewhat churlish because George just beats him in a game of two-handed pinochle.

Furthermore, I can see that George is in pretty fair physical condition, although a little stouter than somewhat, and that he looks as if he is getting some rest.

He is at this time about forty-five years of age, and is still as good-looking as in the days when he is known far and wide as the handsomest and most genteel character on Broadway. His brown hair now has some gray in it along the edges, and there are lines of care in his face, and, of course, George is not dressed as fashionably as usual.

In fact, his clothes need pressing, and he can stand a haircut and a shave, and when I mention this to George he says he understands they are going to give him all the haircutting he requires before morning, and maybe a close shave, too.

In the old days Gentleman George is very prominent in the jewelry trade with Tommy Entrata, and his associates, and anybody will tell you that Tommy and his crowd are the best in the country, because they pursue strictly business methods, and are very high-principled.

They generally work with a character by the name of Lou Adolia, who is a private fuzz often employed by big insurance companies that make a specialty of insuring jewelry for wealthy female parties — a fuzz being a way of saying a detective — although the chances are Lou Adolia cannot really find his hip pocket with both hands.

But when Tommy Entrata and his associates come into possession of jewelry belonging to these wealthy female parties, they notify Lou Adolia, and he arranges with the insurance companies to pay a certain sum for the return of the merchandise, and no beefs, and everybody is satisfied, especially the insurance companies, because, of course, if they do not get the goods back, the companies will have to pay the full amount of the insurance.

As Tommy Entrata is generally very reasonable in his fees on jewelry that comes into his possession, it really is a most economical arrangement for

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the insurance companies, and for everybody else concerned, and it is also very nice for Lou Adolia, as he always gets a reward from the companies, and sometimes a piece of what Tommy Entrata collects.

Then a piece always goes to the stout fellow in the city in which Tommy Entrata and his associates are operating — the stout fellow being the local fix — because, of course, you understand that in a business as large as this carried on by Tommy Entrata it is necessary to take care of all angles. So the stout fellow looks after the local law to see that it does not interfere with Tommy Entrata any more than is absolutely necessary.

To tell the truth, when Tommy Entrata and his associates go into a town, it is generally as well-organized from top to bottom as Standard Oil, and Tommy not only has a complete roster of all the local jewelry owners, and what they are insured for, from Lou Adolia, but also a few diagrams as to where this jewelry is located, and Tommy never fails to make ample provision for one and all in the town who may be concerned before he turns a wheel. In fact, I hear that in a spot up in the Northwest Tommy once even declares the mayor and the Commissioner of Public Safety in on one of his transactions, just out of the goodness of his heart, and this unselfishness in his business operations makes Tommy highly respected far and wide.

Anyway, Gentleman George is one of Tommy Entrata's experts in the matter of coming into possession of jewelry, and Tommy appreciates George no little, as George is strictly a lone hand at his work, and he never carries that thing on him, and considers all forms of violence most revolting, so he never gets into trouble, or at least not much.

I am telling you all this so you will understand that Tommy Entrata conducts his business in a high-class, conservative manner, and personally I consider him a great boon to a community, because he teaches people the value of insurance, and now I will return to Gentleman George in his cell in the death house in Trenton, N. J.

"Well," George says, "there you are, and here I am, and you are the only friend that comes to see me since the judge mentions the date that now becomes of some importance in my life, and which is, in fact, tomorrow. And now I wish to tell you a story, which will be the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, and the object of this story is to show that I once perform a great service to the public."

At this, I become uneasy, because I am afraid it may be a tedious story, and I do not care to remain in such surroundings listening to reminiscence, so I request George to epitomize as much as possible, and to omit all reference to low characters and sordid situations, and then George states as follows, and to wit, viz.:

In the winter of 1935 I am going southward by train on business bent, and the reason I do not reveal my

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destination at this time is because I do not wish to be recalled as ever hollering copper, even on a city, but I will say that it is a certain winter resort spot about as far below the Mason and Dixon's line as you can get before you start swimming, and a very pleasant spot it is, at that.

The first night out on the train I go into the diner and partake of a fish that is on the menu, because the steward of the diner weighs in with a strong shill for this fish, and the next thing I know I am back in my compartment as sick as anything, and maybe a little bit sicker.

To tell the truth, I am so sick that I think I am going to pass away, and this thought disturbs me no little, as Tommy Entrata is looking forward to my arrival with keen interest, and I know that he is apt to take my passing away as a personal affront.

Well, while I am lying in my berth as sick as stated, all of a sudden the door of my compartment opens, and a pair of specs and a short, scrubby, gray tash appear, and behind the specs and the tash is a stern-looking character of maybe fifty-odd, who speaks to me in a gruff voice, as follows:

"See here, now," he says, "what is all this runting and grunting about? Are you sick?"

"Well," I say, "if I am not sick, I will do until an invalid comes along."

And then I start retching again, and in between retches, I mention the dining-car fish, and I tell the stern-looking character that if he will kindly get the dining-car steward to step into my compartment for just one minute I will die happy.

"You speak great nonsense," the stern-looking character says. "You are not going to die, although," he says, "who knows but what you may be better off if you do? Not enough people know when to die. What ails you is ptomaine poisoning, and I will take charge of this situation myself because I will be unable to sleep in this car with you scrooning and mooning all night.

"I once get the same thing myself in Gloucester, Mass.," he says. "You will expect the fish to be all right in Gloucester, Mass. If I remember," he says, "it is mackerel in my case."

Then he rings for the porter, and pretty soon he has the train secretary, and the Pullman conductor, and even a couple of other passengers running in and out of my compartment getting him this, and that, and one thing and another, and dosing me with I do not know what, and sick as I am, I can see that this stern-looking character is accustomed to having people step around when he speaks.

Well, for a while I am thinking that the best break I can get is to pass away without any further lingering; then, by and by, I commence feeling better, and finally I doze off to sleep. But I seem to remember the stern-looking character mentioning that he is going to the same place that I am, and that he is just returning from a hunting trip in Canada, and I also seem to recall him telling me what a wonderful shot he is with any kind of firearms.

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Afterward, however, I figure I must dream all this because the next morning the stern-looking character just glances in on me once and asks how I feel in a tone of voice that indicates he does not care much one way or the other, and after this I do not see hide or hair of him, and I can see that he does not mean to make a friendship of the matter.

In fact, when I am getting off the train at my destination, I suddenly remember that I do not even know the stern-looking character's name, and I am sorry about this, as so few people in the world are ever good to me that I wish to cherish the names of those who are. But, of course, I now have no time for sentiment, as duty calls me, and I do not bother to inquire around and about with reference to the stern-looking character.

I telephone Tommy Entrata, and make a meet with him for dinner in a night club that is called by the name of the *Bath and Sail Club*, although there is no bathing connected with it whatever, and no sailing either, for that matter, and while I am waiting there for Tommy, I observe at another table the most beautiful Judy I see in many a day, and you know very well that few better judges of beauty ever live than yours sincerely, G. George.

She is young, and has hair the color of straw, and she is dressed in a gorgeous white evening gown, and she has plenty of junk on her in the way of diamonds, and she seems to be waiting for someone and I find myself regretting it is not me. I am so impressed by her that I call Emil, the headwaiter, and question him, because Emil is an old friend of mine, and I know he always has a fund of information on matters such as this.

"Emil," I say, "who is the lovely pancake over there by the window?"

"Cemetery bait," Emil says, so I know he means she is married, and has a husband who is selfish about her, and naturally I cast no sheep's eyes in her direction, especially as Tommy Entrata comes in about now and takes me to a private room where we have a nice dinner, and discuss my business in this city.

It is in pursuit of this business, at the hour of 1 A.M. on a warm Sunday morning, that I am making a call at the residence of a character by the name of Colonel Samuel B. Venus, and am in the boudoir of his ever-loving wife, and a beautiful room it is, at that, with the windows on one side looking out over the sea waves, and the windows on the other side overlooking a patio of whispering palm trees.

The moon is shining down on this scene, and it is so lovely that I stand at the front windows a few moments looking out over the water before I start seeking the small can, or safe, that I know is concealed in a clothes closet in the room, unless the butler in the Venus house is telling a terrible falsehood and accepting money from us under false pretenses for this information and for admitting me to the premises.

Of course, Colonel Samuel B.

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Venus's ever-loving wife is not present in her boudoir at this hour, and neither is Colonel Samuel B. Venus, and in fact I afterward learn that the only way Colonel Samuel B. Venus can get in there is on a writ of *habeas corpus*, but this has nothing to do with my story.

My information is that Colonel Samuel B. Venus is a very wealthy character of maybe sixty years of age, come next grass, and that his ever-loving wife is less than half of that, and has some of the finest jewelry in this country, including pearls, diamonds, star rubies, emeralds, and I do not know what all else, and I am given to understand that Colonel Samuel B. Venus leaves the night before on a fishing trip, and that Mrs. Colonel Samuel B. Venus is out somewhere wearing only a couple of pounds of her jewels, so the rest of her stuff is bound to be in the little can in her boudoir.

Well, the little can is in the closet just where the butler reports, and I observe that it is such a can as I will be able to open with a toothpick if necessary, although, of course, I bring along my regular can opener, which is a tool for cutting open safes that I personally invent, as you perhaps remember, although I never think to get a patent on it from the government, and I am about to start operations when I hear voices, and two characters, male and female, enter the boudoir.

So there I am in the closet among a lot of dresses and coats, and all this and that, and, what is more, I leave the closet door open a little when I go in, as I figure I may require a little air, and I am now afraid to close the door for fear of making a noise, and the best I can make of this situation is that I am a gone gosling. To tell the truth, it is one of the few times in my life that I regret I do not have that thing on me, just for self-defense.

I can see right away from the way she talks that the female character must be Mrs. Colonel Samuel B. Venus, but the character with her is by no means her husband, and naturally I am greatly scandalized to think that a married broad will bring a party not her husband into her boudoir with her at such an hour, and I am wondering what on earth the world is coming to.

But although I listen keenly, there seems to be no goings-on, and in fact all they are doing is talking, so I figure the character with Mrs. Colonel Samuel B. Venus must be a character without any imagination whatever.

Finally, when I judge from their conversation that they are looking at the view of the sad sea waves, I cop a quick peek, and I see that Mrs. Colonel Samuel B. Venus is nobody but the blonde I admire at the *Bath and Sail Club*, and while this surprises me no little, it does not surprise me half as much as the fact that the character with her is a party by the name of Count Tomaso, who is known far and wide as a most unworthy character. In fact, Count Tomaso is regarded in some circles as a 22-carat fink, a fink being a character who is lower than a mudcat's vest pocket.

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He is a small, slim-built character, with dark hair greased down on his head, and he wears a monocle, and seems very foreign in every respect. In fact, Count Tomaso claims to belong to the Italian nobility, but he is no more a count than I am, and to tell the truth, he is nothing but a ginzo out of Sacramento, and his right name is Carfarelli.

For a matter of twenty years or more this Count Tomaso is on the socket, which is a way of saying his dodge is blackmail, and of course there is little or no class to such a dodge as this. He generally pitches to foolish old married Judys, and gets them wedged in with letters, and one thing and another, and then puts the shake on them.

Personally, I rarely criticize anybody else's methods of earning a livelihood, but I can never approve of the shake, although I must admit that from what I hear of Count Tomaso, he really is an artist in his line, and can nine those old phlugs in first-class style when he is knuckling.

I only hope and trust that his presence in Mrs. Colonel Samuel B. Venus's boudoir does not mean that Count Tomaso is trespassing in any way upon my affairs, as I can see where this will produce complications, and it is always my policy to avoid complications, so I remain very quiet, with a firm grip on my can opener in case Mrs. Colonel Samuel B. Venus or Count Tomaso happens to come to the closet.

But it seems to be nothing but a social visit, as I can hear her getting out some liquor, and after a couple of drinks they begin speaking of nothing much in particular, including the weather. Presently the conversation becomes quite dull, for it is all about love, and conversation about love always bores me no little unless I am making the conversation myself, although I can see that Mrs. Colonel Samuel B. Venus is better than a raw hand in conversation of this nature.

I am so bored that I put down my can opener and am about to doze off among the dresses, when all of a sudden the conversation takes a very unusual turn, to be sure, for Mrs. Colonel Samuel B. Venus says to Count Tomaso like this:

"I know you love me," she says, "and I love you madly in return, but what good will it do us? I am married to a character old enough to be my father, and although he does not know it, I hate and despise him. But even if I tell him this, I know he will never give me a divorce, and, besides, if I do get a divorce, he is sure to put me off with a mere pittance. I am bound to him as long as he lives," she says. "As long as he lives, Tomaso."

Well, Count Tomaso says this is certainly a sad state of affairs, and seems to be taking another drink, and she goes on as follows:

"Of course," she says, "if he passes away, Tomaso, I will marry you the next day, or anyway," she says, "as soon as my mourning goes out of style. Then we can go all over the world and enjoy our love, because I know his

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will leaves me all his vast fortune. I am afraid it is wicked," she says, "but sometimes I wish an accident will befall him."

Now I can see that what is coming off here is that Mrs. Colonel Samuel B. Venus is giving Count Tomaso a hint in a roundabout way to cause an accident to befall Colonel Samuel B. Venus, and thinks I to myself there in the closet, it is a pretty how-do-you-do if such goings-on are tolerated in society circles, and I am glad I am not in society. To tell the truth, I consider Mrs. Colonel Samuel B. Venus's attitude most unbecoming.

Well, they converse at some length about various forms of accidents that they hear of, but they seem unable to arrive at any definite conclusion, and I am almost sorry I am unable to join in the discussion and offer a few original ideas of my own, when Mrs. Colonel Samuel B. Venus says:

"Well," she says, "we are sailing next week on the *Castilla* for New York, and you can come on the same ship. New York is a better place for accidents than down here, because they are not apt to attract so much attention there. But, Tomaso," she says, "be very careful the colonel does not see you on the trip, as he has been hearing things here, and he is terribly jealous, and has a violent temper, and, furthermore, he always has deadly weapons around, and he claims he is a wonderful marksman. Oh, Tomaso," she says, "is it not awful to be yoked to an old character who thinks of nothing but hunting, and fishing, and business, when I love you so much?"

Well, Tomaso says it is, indeed, and does she have a few dibs on her to tide him over the weekend, and it seems she has, and then there is a little offhand billing and cooing that I consider very bad taste in her under her own roof, and finally they go out of the boudoir.

As soon as they depart, I turn to my own business of opening the little can and removing the jewelry, which I deliver to Tommy Entrata, who gives it to Lou Adolia, and this is the time that Lou Adolia gets eighty thousand dollars from the insurance companies for the return of the goods, and then disappears with all the sugar, and without as much as saying aye, yes, or no to anybody.

But I am getting ahead of my story.

A couple of days later I am reclining on the beach with Tommy Entrata, taking a little sun for my complexion, when who comes along in a bathing suit which displays a really remarkable shape but Mrs. Colonel Samuel B. Venus, and who is with her but the stern-looking character who doctors me up on the train, and at first I have half a notion to jump up and say hello to him and thank him for his kindness to me about the fish, but he looks right through me as if he never sees me before in his life, and I can see that he does not remember me, or if he does, he does not care to make anything of it.

So I do not give him a blow, because the way I look at it, the fewer people you know in this world, the

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better you are off. But I ask Tommy Entrata who the stern-looking character is, and I am somewhat surprised when Tommy says:

"Why," he says, "he is Colonel Samuel B. Venus, the party you knock off the other night, but," Tommy says, "let us not speak of that now. Colonel Samuel B. Venus is a most irascible character, and he is making quite a chirp about matters, and it is very fortunate for us that he and his wife are sailing for New York, because the stout fellow is getting nervous about the outcry. By the way," Tommy says, "I do not wish to seem inhospitable in suggesting your departure from these pleasant scenes, but it may be a good idea for you to take it on the Jesse Owens until the beef is chilled. There are many nightingales in these parts," he says, "and they will sing to the law on very slight provocation, for instance such a character as Count Tomaso. I notice him around here nuzzling up to Mrs. Colonel Samuel B. Venus, and while the chances are he is on a business mission of his own, Count Tomaso knows you, and it is always my opinion that he is a singer, at heart."

Well, I do not mention the incident in Mrs. Colonel Samuel B. Venus's boudoir to Tommy Entrata, because in the first place I do not consider it any of his business, and in the second place I know Tommy is not apt to be interested in such a matter, but I get to thinking about the conversation between Mrs. Colonel Samuel B. Venus and Count Tomaso, and I also get to thinking about Colonel Samuel B. Venus being so nice to me in connection with the bad fish.

And thinks I, as long as I must take my departure anyway, a little sea voyage may be beneficial to my health, and I will go on the *Castilla* myself, and will look up Count Tomaso and admonish him that I will hold him personally responsible if any accident happens to Colonel Samuel B. Venus, as I feel it is only fair to do what I can to discharge my debt of gratitude to Colonel Samuel B. Venus concerning the fish.

So when the *Castilla* sails a few days later, I am a passenger, and, furthermore, I have a nice cabin on the same deck as Colonel Samuel B. Venus and his ever-loving wife, because I always believe in traveling with the best people, no matter what.

I see Colonel Samuel B. Venus, and I also see Mrs. Colonel Samuel B. Venus on the first day out, and I observe that Colonel Samuel B. Venus is looking sterner than ever, and also that Mrs. Colonel Samuel B. Venus is growing lovelier by the hour, but never do I see Count Tomaso, although I am pretty sure he does not miss the boat.

I figure that he is taking Mrs. Colonel Samuel B. Venus's advice about keeping out of sight of Colonel Samuel B. Venus.

I do not bother to go looking for Count Tomaso on the *Castilla* to admonish him about Colonel Samuel B. Venus, because I figure I am bound to catch up with him getting off the

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boat in New York, and that in the meantime Colonel Samuel B. Venus is safe from accident, especially as it comes up stormy at sea after we are a few hours out, and Colonel Samuel B. Venus and his ever-loving wife seem to be keeping close to their cabin, and, in fact, so is everybody else.

Well, the storm keeps getting worse, and it is sleety and cold all around and about, and the sea is running higher than somewhat, and now one night off the Jersey coast when I am sleeping as peacefully as anything, I am awakened by a great to-do, and it seems that the *Castilla* is on fire.

Naturally, I do not care to be toasted in my cabin, so I don my clothes, and pop out into the passageway and start for the nearest exit, when I remember that in moments of confusion many characters, male and female, are apt to forget articles of one kind and another that may come in handy to somebody such as me later on, for instance bits of jewelry, and other portable merchandise.

So I try various doors as I go along the passageway, and all of them are open and unoccupied, as the *Castilla* is an old-time vessel with cabin doors that lock with keys, and not with snap locks, and, just as I suspect, I find numerous odds and ends in the way of finger rings, and bracelets and clips and pins and necklaces, and watches, and gold cigarette cases, and even a few loose bundles of ready scratch, so I am very glad, indeed, that I am gifted with foresight.

Finally, I come to one door that seems to be locked, and I remember that this is the cabin occupied by Colonel Samuel B. Venus and his ever-loving wife, and after first knocking at the door and receiving no reply, I figure they hastily depart and carelessly lock the door after them, and I also figure that I am bound to garner something of more than ordinary value there.

So I kick the door in, and who is in the cabin on a bed, all trussed up like a goose, with a towel tied across his mouth to keep him from hollering out loud, but Colonel Samuel B. Venus, in person.

Naturally, I am somewhat surprised at this spectacle, and also somewhat embarrassed to have Colonel Samuel B. Venus find me kicking in his door, but of course this is no time for apologies, so I take a quick swivel about the cabin to see if there are any articles lying around that I may be able to use. I am slightly disappointed to note that there appears to be nothing, and I am about to take my departure, when all of a sudden I remember my debt of gratitude to Colonel Samuel B. Venus, and I realize that it will be most unkind to leave him in this predicament to be barbecued like a steer without being able to move hand or foot.

So I out with my pocket shiv, and cut him loose, and I also remove the towel, and as soon as he can talk, Colonel Samuel B. Venus issues a statement to me in a most severe tone of voice, as follows:

"They try to murder me," he says. "My own wife, Cora, and a character

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in a white polo coat with a little cap to match. When the alarm of fire is sounded," Colonel Samuel B. Venus says, "she starts screaming, and he comes banging up against our door, and she unlocks it and lets him in before I have time to think, and then he knocks me down with something, I do not know what."

"The chances are," I say, "it is a blunt instrument."

"You may be right," Colonel Samuel B. Venus says. "Anyway, after he knocks me down, my own wife, Cora, picks up one of my shoes and starts belting me over the head with the heel, and then she helps the character in the polo coat and the little cap to match tie me up as you find me."

"It is a scurvy trick," I say.

"I am half unconscious," Colonel Samuel B. Venus says, "but I remember hearing my own wife, Cora, remark that the fire is a wonderful break for them, and will save them a lot of bother in New York. And then before they leave, she hits me another belt on the head with the shoe. I fear," Colonel Samuel B. Venus says, "that my own wife, Cora, is by no means the ever-loving helpmeet I think. In fact," he says, "I am now wondering about the overdose of sleeping powders she gives me in London, England, in 1931, and about the bomb in my automobile in Los Angeles, Cal., in 1933."

"Well, well, well," I say, "let us let bygones be bygones, and get off this tub, as it seems to be getting hotter than a ninth-inning finish around here."

But Colonel Samuel B. Venus remains very testy about the incident he just describes, and he fumbles around under a pillow on the bed on which I find him, and outs with that thing, and opens the cylinder as if to make sure it is loaded, and says to me like this:

"I will shoot him down like a dog," he says. "I mean the character in the white polo coat and the little cap to match. He undoubtedly leads my poor little wife, Cora, astray in this, although," he says, "I do not seem to recall him anywhere in the background of the overdose and the bomb matters. But she is scarcely more than a child and does not know right from wrong. He is the one who must die," Colonel Samuel B. Venus says. "I wonder who he is?" he says.

Well, of course I know Colonel Samuel B. Venus must be talking about Count Tomaso, but I can see that Count Tomaso is a total stranger to him, and while I am by no means opposed to Colonel Samuel B. Venus's sentiments with reference to Count Tomaso, I do not approve of his spirit of forgiveness toward Mrs. Colonel Samuel B. Venus, because I figure that as long as she is around and about, Colonel Samuel B. Venus will always be in danger of accidents.

But I do not feel that this is a time for argument, so I finally get him to go up on the deck with me, and as soon as we are on deck, Colonel Samuel B. Venus leaves me and starts running every which way as if he is looking for somebody.

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There seems to be some little agitation on deck, what with smoke and flame coming out of the *Castilla* amidships, and many characters, male and female, running up and down, and around and about, and small children crying.

Some of the crew are launching lifeboats, and then getting into these boats themselves, and pulling away from the burning ship without waiting for any passengers, which strikes me as most discourteous on the part of the sailors and which alarms many passengers so they start chucking themselves over the rail into the sea trying to catch up with the boats.

Well, this scene is most distasteful to me, so I retire from the general melee, and go looking elsewhere about the ship, figuring I may find an opportunity to ease myself quietly into a boat before all the seats are taken by sailors, and finally I come upon a group trying to launch a big life raft over the rail, and about this time I observe Colonel Samuel B. Venus standing against the rail with that thing in his hand, and peering this way and that.

And then I notice a boat pulling away from the ship, and in the stern of the boat I see a character in a white polo coat, and a little cap to match, and I call the attention of Colonel Samuel B. Venus to same.

The boat is so overcrowded that it is far down in the water, but the waves, which are running very high, are carrying it away in long lunges, and it is fully one hundred yards off, and is really visible to the naked eye by the light of the flames from the *Castilla* only when it rises a moment to the top of a wave, and Colonel Samuel B. Venus looks for some time before he sees what I wish him to see.

"I spot him now," he says. "I recognize the white polo coat and the little cap to match."

And with this he ups with that thing and goes rooty-toot-toot out across the water three times, and the last I see of the white polo coat and the little cap to match they are folding up together very gently just as a big wave washes the boat off into the darkness beyond the light of the burning ship.

By this time the raft is in the water, and I take Colonel Samuel B. Venus and chuck him onto the raft, and then I jump down after him, and as the raft is soon overcrowded, I give the foot to a female character who is on the raft before anybody else and ease her off into the water.

As this female character disappears in the raging sea, I am not surprised to observe that she is really nobody but Count Tomaso, as I seem to remember seeing Count Tomaso making Mrs. Colonel Samuel B. Venus change clothes with him at the point of a knife.

Well, some of the boats get ashore, and some do not, and in one that does arrive, they find the late Mrs. Colonel Samuel B. Venus, and everybody is somewhat surprised to note that she is in male garments with a white polo coat and a little cap to match.

I wish to call attention to the pub-

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lic service I render in easing Count Tomaso off the raft, because here is a character who is undoubtedly a menace to the sanctuary of the home.

And I take pride in the fact that I discharge my debt of gratitude to Colonel Samuel B. Venus, and it is not my fault that he permits himself to be so overcome by his experience on the ship and on the raft that he turns out to be a raving nut, and never has the pleasure of learning that his aim is still so good that he can put three slugs in a moving target within the span of a baby's hand.

"Why, George," I say to Gentleman George, "then you are the victim of a great wrong, and I will see the governor, or somebody, in your behalf at once. They cannot do this to you, when, according to your own story, you are not directly connected with the matter of Mrs. Colonel Samuel B. Venus, and it is only a case of mistaken identity, at best."

"Oh, pshaw!" Gentleman George says. "They are not taking the severe measures they contemplate with me because of anything that happens to Mrs. Colonel Samuel B. Venus. They are vexed with me," George says, "because one night I take Lou Adolia's automobile out on the salt meadows near Secaucus, N. J., and burn it to a crisp, and it seems that I forget to remove Lou Adolia first from same."

"Well, George," I say, "bon voyage."

"The same to you," George says, "and many of them."

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Here is an interesting item of 'tec trivia which you may find amusing . . . The most ambitious, if not the most successful, treatise on the detective story written in the English language B.H. (Before Haycraft) was H. Douglas Thomson's full-length book, MASTERS OF MYSTERY *(London: Collins, 1931). At the back of the book, which contains nearly 300 pages, are three indexes — of the titles of detective stories mentioned in the text, of the names of detectives referred to, and of the names of authors commented on.*

Now, which author's name would you think has the most page-references listed after it in the authors' index? The name of Edgar Allan Poe, perhaps? — because after all Poe invented the modern form, laid down all the major principles of technique, and is acknowledged, even by the most patriotic British critics, to be the Father of the Detective Story. Having made the greatest contribution, Poe's name would be the logical one to have the greatest number of references and cross-references. But no — Poe stands high, but not first; indeed, his name is not even second in number of page-listings. The names of the great 'tec triumvirate which came after Poe — Conan Doyle, G. K. Chesterton, Melville Davisson Post? No — like Poe, Doyle and Chesterton are also near the top, but neither one is the leader in number of index references; and Post, creator of Uncle Abner, is not listed at all — imagine a full-length book devoted to the history of the detective story and not even mentioning the name of Melville Davisson Post! For that matter, Dashiell Hammett squeaks in by virtue of a single reference (in which his given name is spelled Dashiel), and so well-known an American writer as Earl Derr Biggers, creator of Charlie Chan, is completely overlooked.

Not many readers, including deep students of the genre, would guess which writer has the most page numbers after his name. The author is — Freeman Wills Crofts.

Here is the box-score for all detective-story writers mentioned on fifteen pages or more in H. Douglas Thomson's MASTERS OF MYSTERY:

Freeman Wills Crofts	28
A. Conan Doyle	27
Edgar Allan Poe	25
Emile Gaboriau	24
Agatha Christie	24
Edgar Wallace	22
Dorothy L. Sayers	20
S. S. Van Dine	18
R. Austin Freeman	16
G. K. Chesterton	15

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Using the same system of indexing, here is the box-score for the same authors, as mentioned in Howard Haycraft's full-length history of the detective story, MURDER FOR PLEASURE *(New York: Appleton-Century, 1941):*

Freeman Wills Crofts	*6*
A. Conan Doyle	*23*
Edgar Allan Poe	*37*
Emile Gaboriau	*14*
Agatha Christie	*9*
Edgar Wallace	*4*
Dorothy L. Sayers	*28*
S. S. Van Dine	*12**
R. Austin Freeman	*7*
G. K. Chesterton	*9*

A comparison of the two box-scores at least readjusts the relative importance of Edgar Allan Poe. . . . As to Melville Davisson Post, he is mentioned on 7 pages in MURDER FOR PLEASURE, *Hammett on 9 pages, and Biggers on 5 pages.*

Thus, with characteristic irrelevance, we introduce a story by Freeman Wills Crofts — a story typical of the British school, and illustrating again the three S's of Anglo-Saxon sleuthing — the soft, slow, smooth style which, like an English tweed suit, wears well and long. . . .

THE GREUZE GIRL

by FREEMAN WILLS CROFTS

MR. NICHOLAS LUMLEY, commission agent, laid his fountain pen on his desk, straightened himself up with a sigh of relief, and glanced at his watch. To his satisfaction, it told him that the close of what had been a hard day's work had been reached, and that in a few moments he must leave his office if he wished to catch his usual train home.

But Fate ruled otherwise. As he rose from his desk an office boy entered and laid a card before him. It appeared that Mr. Silas S. Snaith, of Hall's Building, 105 Broadway, N. Y., wished to see him.

"Show him in," said Mr. Lumley, stifling a sigh of disappointment.

Mr. Snaith proved to be a tall, slim man of some five-and-thirty, with clear-cut, strongly-marked features and two very keen blue eyes, which danced over Mr. Lumley and about the room as if to leave no detail of

* Also, there are 14 page-references under the name of Willard Huntington Wright.

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either unnoticed. He was well dressed in dark clothes of American cut, but a huge ruby ring and diamond sleeve-links seemed to point to a larger endowment of money than of taste. In his hand he carried a leather dispatch-case of unusually large dimensions.

"Mr. Nicholas Lumley?" he began, speaking with a drawl and slight American accent. "Pleased to meet you, sir."

He held out his hand, which Mr. Lumley shook, murmuring his acknowledgments.

The other seated himself.

"You take on jobs for other people," he said, "odd jobs — for a consideration?"

Mr. Lumley admitted the impeachment.

"Why, then, I'd like if you would take on one for me. It's a short job, and easy in a way, and if you can put it through there'll be quite a little commission."

"What is the job, Mr. Snaith?"

"It'll take a minute or two to tell you. But first, you'll understand it's confidential."

"Certainly. Most of my work is that."

There was a hint of coldness in Mr. Lumley's voice which the other sensed.

"That's all right. No need to get rattled. Have a cigar?"

He pulled two from his waistcoat pocket, holding one out. Mr. Lumley accepted, and both men lit up.

"It's this way," went on Snaith. "I'm in lumber, and I've not done too badly — house on Fifth Avenue and all that. I've more spare time than I had, and you mightn't believe it, but the hobby I'm fondest of is pictures. I've toured Europe for the galleries alone, and a mighty fine time I had. And my own collection runs to quite a few dollars.

"A year ago last fall I struck a picture that beat anything I'd seen before — at Poictiers, in France — and when I left that town the picture came too. It cost me a cool $15,000, but it was worth it. It was a Greuze, a small thing, not more than ten inches by a foot — just a girl's head — but a fair wonder. The man I bought it from told me it was one of a pair, and since then I've been looking out for the other one. And now, by the Lord, I've found it!"

Mr. Snaith paused and drew on his cigar, which he held pipewise in the corner of his mouth.

"I went up to see your Lord Arthur Wentworth this trip — Wentworth Hall, Durham. My word, that's some place! I had business with him about some acres of trees; he holds land in N'York State. Well, he had to go to some other room to get a map of his domains, and I had a look round the study to pass the time till he came back — idle curiosity, as you might say. Well, I'll be jiggered if there, on the wall behind where I'd been sitting, wasn't hanging the companion picture. I'd seen photographs of it, so I knew. I reckoned it might be only a copy, so I had a good squint at it

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before his lordship came back. I thought it was the gen-u-ine thing, but I just wasn't plumb sure.

"I had time to take a couple of snaps of it with my pocket camera before his lordship came back. Then we got the lumber deal through. For all he's a member of the effete British aristocracy, and about as ro-bust as a wisp of hay at that, he's all there, is Lord Arthur. A hard nut, as maybe you'll find.

"I said nothing about the picture, but all the time I was figuring how to get wise to its gen-u-ineness. When I got back to London I went to the best man I knew in the trade — Frank L. Mitchell, of Pall Mall. What Frank L. Mitchell doesn't know about pictures wouldn't be worth hearing. I had him promise to go down and see the picture for me.

"He went the next day. He waited about till he saw his lordship and friends go out hunting, then he went to the house and, with lubricating the butler's palm, got a look round inside. He saw the picture, and he's satisfied it's the real article. But he went one better than that. The holders of all these gen-u-ine pictures are known, and when he got back he looked up the records, and found that when the present lord's father purchased it fifty years ago it was recognized to be the real thing, and paid for as such.

"So that's bedrock. It's likely the present owner knows that, but, of course, it's not certain. Mitchell figures that bit of canvas is worth three thousand of your pounds — $15,000. Now, Mr. Lumley, I want that picture, and I want you to get it for me."

The American sat back and looked expectantly at Mr. Lumley. The latter's interest, which had been aroused by his visitor's story, suddenly waned.

"That's easier said than done, I'm afraid," he answered slowly. "Ten to one his lordship won't sell."

"I reckon he'll sell — on my terms. Note the connections." Mr. Snaith demonstrated on his fingers. "Here you have a lord that's hard up — I got wise to that. It takes him all he can do to keep his end up. Three thousand may not be much, but it's a darned sight more than he can afford to drop for nothing. You say he'll not sell. I'll agree, and ask, Why not? Why, because he's a proud man. He's not going to have that space on his study wall to remind him and his friends and his servants what he's done. But that's where I come in."

Mr. Snaith picked up his dispatch-case and, opening it carefully, drew out a tissue-covered object and laid it on Mr. Lumley's desk. With thin, nervous fingers he unwrapped the paper, revealing to the commission agent's astonished gaze a small oil-painting in a heavy and elaborate gilt frame.

It was a charming study of a girl's head; light, elegant, dainty work. She was beautiful; blue-eyed, creamy-complexioned, and with masses of red-gold hair. But it was not her beauty that held the observer. It was

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the soul which shone behind the face.

"Warm stuff," murmured Snaith appreciatively; "and that's only a copy. The picture's celebrated the world over, and there's scores of copies. It's so good, is this one" — he shot a sidelong glance at Mr. Lumley — "*I* can hardly tell it isn't gen-u-ine, and I doubt if you or Lord Wentworth could either."

Mr. Lumley felt slightly uncomfortable, though he could not say exactly why. But something faintly unpleasant in his visitor's manner grated on his rather sensitive nerves.

"Now, my proposition is this," the American went on. "You see his lordship and show him this picture. Tell him straight it's a copy, but so good a copy that only a few men in the world could tell the difference. That he'll be able to see for himself. Tell him your client offers him £2,000 to let you change the pictures."

"Why not deal with him yourself?"

"Two reasons. First, he don't love me any over that lumber deal. He was polite and all that, but I could sense he was glad to see my back. Secondly, I have business in Paris tomorrow, and I'll only have time to call here passing through London on my way to the States next Friday."

Mr. Lumley did not reply, and Snaith continued, speaking earnestly:

"He'll do it, for he needs the money. Note how it would seem to him. No one will know anything about it, and the new picture will look the same as the other, and if the question ever does come up, it will be supposed a mistake was made fifty years ago when his father bought it. His pride will be saved. And if two thousand doesn't do the trick, why, you can offer him three. I just must have the thing, and I don't mind a hundred or two one way or another. Your own fee, if you put it through, to be what you name — say £200 and expenses — that is, if you think that's enough."

"Enough?" cried Mr. Lumley. "More than enough."

"That's all right. Then you'll take it on? Now about *bona fides*. I've inquired about you before I came here, and what I've heard has satisfied me. But you know nothing of me, so you'll likely want some money instead of an introduction. As a guarantee of good faith I'll hand you notes for £2,000. If the deal comes to more you can pay it. You'll have the picture as security, and you can hold it till I pay you the balance. That all right?"

Mr. Lumley thought rapidly. The business appeared simple and straightforward and, so far as he could see, square.

"That seems very fair, Mr. Snaith. I'll do what I can."

"Good. Then count these."

The visitor took a roll of notes from his pocket and, dividing them, handed a bundle to his new agent. There were twenty of them, Bank of England notes, each value £100.

"Correct," said Mr. Lumley as he scribbled a receipt.

"There are two other things,"

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Snaith went on. "First, I don't want my name mentioned to Lord Wentworth. As I say, we rubbed each other the wrong way over that lumber deal, and there's no sense in putting his back up at the start. Just say a rich American wants it. And next, note my movements for the next three days. I cross tonight to Paris, and the Hotel Angleterre will find me till Friday morning. I cross Friday, call here at six p.m. for the picture, and leave Euston by the American boat train at seven. Got that?"

"I follow you," answered Mr. Lumley. "That gives me two days. I'll keep your case to carry the picture."

When the American left, Mr. Lumley remained seated at his desk, his mind busy with the somewhat unusual commission with which he had been entrusted. He had frequently been asked to buy pictures, but there was a peculiar feature in this case. That idea of substituting the copy was new to his experience. But it was certainly ingenious, and if Lord Arthur were really hard up, it was conceivable that it might tempt him to agree to the proposal. But apart from this novel feature, the matter seemed reasonable and aboveboard enough. And yet Mr. Lumley was not satisfied. He was, or believed himself to be, a judge of character, and all his instincts had bade him beware of this Snaith. He felt that it behooved him to be on his guard, and stories he had read of confidence tricks recurred to his memory.

But he had undertaken the task, and it now no longer mattered whether he had been wise or foolish; he must get on with it. He saw that he had no time to lose, and eleven o'clock that night, therefore, found him moving out of King's Cross en route for the north. But like the king of old, his thoughts troubled him and he could not sleep.

Suddenly an idea shot into his mind. Those notes — Snaith had parted with them so easily — *were they forgeries?* Feverishly he took them from his pocket and examined them. No, they seemed all right. But he determined he would make sure. His first business in the morning would be to call at a bank in Durham and have them tested.

And then a possible meaning of Snaith's actions flashed before him — a real thing before which his half-nightmarish imaginings vanished. As the idea sank into his horrified brain, Nicholas Lumley began to know temptation.

He had believed that the American's offer was a £200 commission on the completion of a sale. But he saw now that he had been mistaken. No sale had been contemplated. The thing was hideously clear. He had been offered, not £200, but £2,200 — £3,200 — any sum almost that he liked to name — *to steal the picture!*

And, merciful heavens, how easy it would be! He had only to devise some scheme to get to the study with his case and arrange something — a telephone call, for example — to get his

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lordship out of the room. Twenty seconds would do the whole thing. He could change the pictures, complete his business, leave without haste, and —— Three thousand two hundred pounds! Perhaps four thousand!

Four thousand pounds! Four thousand pounds skillfully invested meant anything up to £250 a year. Mr. Lumley was not a rich man, and an additional £250 would just make the difference between continuous, wearing economy and ease.

"Oh, Lord!" he groaned.

And Snaith would say nothing. He would perhaps smile knowingly, but he would pay and take his picture and go.

He wrestled with it all night, and next morning his face was white and grim as he sallied forth from the hotel in which he had breakfasted in search of a bank. Here one of his fears was disposed of. The notes were genuine.

An hour later he stepped out of a taxi at the door of Wentworth Hall. On requesting an interview with his lordship, he was shown into a small sitting-room and asked to wait. After some minutes he was joined by Lord Arthur, an elderly man, thin and a little stooped, whose face was lined as if from care and suffering.

He looked like a man with an incurable disease, to whom life is a continuous burden. But there was no trace of bitterness about him, and his manner as he waved Mr. Lumley to a chair was not only courteous in the extreme, but even kindly.

"I am a commission agent, as you may have seen from my card, Lord Arthur," began Mr. Lumley, "and I have called on behalf of a wealthy American client to lay before you a proposal which I sincerely trust you will not consider objectionable. May I say, as explaining my own position, that I have been offered a handsome commission — no less than £200 — if my client's wishes can be met? You will understand, therefore" — Mr. Lumley smiled slightly — "how much I hope you will see your way at least to give the proposal your full consideration."

Lord Arthur seemed pleased by his visitor's candor.

"I will certainly do that," he replied pleasantly. "What does your client want?"

For answer, Mr. Lumley opened the dispatch-case and took from it Mr. Snaith's picture.

"Good gracious!" cried Lord Arthur when the tissue paper had been unrolled. "My Greuze! How did you get that?" He looked sharply, and with some suspicion, at his visitor.

"It is not yours, Lord Arthur. It is only a copy. But I wish you would tell me what you think of it."

The old gentlemen bent over the frame.

"If I had not your assurance, I should swear it was mine," he said at last. "Why, the very frame is identical. Bring it into the study and let us compare."

Mr. Lumley, having folded back the paper and replaced the frame in

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its case, followed the owner of the house to a large, well-furnished, airy room, giving on the terrace before the entrance. Lord Arthur closed the door and directed his visitor's attention to the wall above the fireplace.

Though he knew what to expect, Mr. Lumley could scarcely refrain from a start of astonishment, for there, to all intents and purposes, hung the veritable picture which had been given to him by Snaith.

"Put yours beside it," Lord Arthur directed.

Mr. Lumley obeyed, and held his picture on the wall next the other. Both men gazed in silence. The two seemed absolutely identical; the most minute examination even of the frames failed to discover any difference between them.

"I shouldn't have believed it," Lord Arthur said after a prolonged scrutiny; and then, indicating a deep armchair before the fire, "But sit down, won't you, and tell me all about it."

Mr. Lumley slipped his copy back in the case and sat down.

"My client," he explained, "is an enthusiastic collector. He has recently purchased the companion to this, and he is keenly anxious to get the original of this one also. He wondered whether by any chance you could be induced so far to oblige him as to accept this copy, together with whatever sum you cared to name — he suggested £2,000 — but whatever you thought fair, in exchange for the original."

Lord Arthur stared.

"Upon my word," he exclaimed, "this is a very extraordinary business." He sat in thought for a few moments; then, with a little sidelong glance, asked:

"Suppose I said three thousand?"

"If you think that a fair figure, I am authorized to pay it."

His lordship made a gesture of surprise.

"Extraordinary!" he repeated. "And how does your client know that my picture is the original?"

"That, unfortunately, I cannot explain to your lordship, as I am not in his confidence. But I may say that he seemed perfectly satisfied on the point."

"It's more than I am. I may tell you that I have always regarded that picture — my own, I mean — as a copy. And I don't think, even if it were the original, that it would be worth anything like what you say. My knowledge of pictures, I admit, is but slight, still, I should say that a thousand would be its outside price."

"Then, Lord Arthur," interjected Mr. Lumley with a smile, "would you allow me to change it for a thousand pounds?"

"I didn't say that. What I meant was that I should like an explanation of what seems to me a very peculiar proposal, to put it mildly. A man comes to me and offers me for a copy of a picture at least twice the outside value of the original. It sounds queer on the face of it, doesn't it?"

"But, Lord Arthur, you must re-

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nember that in such a case the intrinsic value of the picture may not epresent its reasonable price. It may ıave an additional sentimental value. t may be an heirloom. You might ıot care to hang anything but an ›riginal on your walls. These are conıiderations which my client took into ccount. That they have a cash value vould be recognized in any court of aw."

"Quite true," Lord Arthur admitted. "And," he went on dryly, 'bearing these points in mind, suppose I accept your £2,000 for my opy, would you be satisfied with hese terms?"

"More than satisfied. I should be grateful."

"You said you had the money here?"

For answer, Mr. Lumley laid the wenty £100 notes on the table. Lord Arthur took them up.

"You will excuse me, I'm sure, but he matter is so very extraordinary hat I think I am entitled to ask, how lo I know that these are genuine, and, f genuine, are not stolen?"

"Perfectly entitled, Lord Arthur. would suggest that you send a man vith them to your bank, and let the natter stand over until you receive his eport."

Lord Arthur did not reply, but, noving over to his table, he wrote or a few seconds, and blotted what ıe had written.

"Sign that, and you may take the ›icture," he said.

The document read:

Received from Lord Arthur Wentworth, Wentworth Hall, the copy of Greuze's "Une Jeune Fille" which up to now has hung on his study wall, in return for the copy of the same picture supplied him by the undersigned on this date, and in consideration of the sum of two thousand pounds (£2,000), *which has been paid in Bank of England £100 notes, numbered A61753E to A61772E.*

"I don't want to take your client's money on false pretenses," Lord Arthur went on, "so if within a month he has satisfied himself that he has bought a copy, I will refund him his £2,000 and his picture on his returning my own. If he likes to pay this money for the exchange, I do not see why I should not accept it. But you must warn him from me that I think he is in error, and the responsibility must be his alone. At all events, may I say I think you have fairly earned your commission?"

Mr. Lumley, having expressed his gratitude and satisfaction, signed the receipt for the picture, obtained another for the money, exchanged the pictures, packed his purchase in the case, and, greatly rejoicing, took his leave.

As he sat smoking in the afternoon express to King's Cross, he wondered idly which of them — Snaith or Lord Arthur — held the correct view about the picture. In any case, it did not matter very much to him, Lumley. He had done what he was asked, he would give Snaith a true account of

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what had happened, claim his commission, and, so far as he was concerned, the incident would be closed.

And then occurred one of those singular coincidences which are supposed to take place only in books, but which, as a matter of fact, happen more frequently in real life. It chanced that at Grantham, Dobbs, the R.A., got into the compartment which up till then Mr. Lumley had occupied in solitary state. Now, Lumley had played golf with Dobbs and the two were on friendly terms.

They conversed on general topics for some minutes, and then it occurred to Mr. Lumley that it would be interesting to get Dobbs's opinion of the Greuze. He therefore opened his case and produced the picture.

"What do you think of that?" he asked, as he handed it over.

"Too dark to say," returned the other, "but it looks a jolly fine copy."

"A copy?"

"A copy, yes. It's a well-known picture. Unless" — the R.A. smiled — "unless you are just back from a burglarous expedition to Paris, the original is still in the Louvre."

Mr. Lumley gasped.

"I suppose, Dobbs," he said earnestly, "you're sure about that?"

"Of course I'm sure. Everyone knows that who knows anything at all of pictures. Why, I remember the exact place on the wall where it's hung. I've looked at it scores of times. You didn't by any chance think it was an original?"

"I know nothing about it, but I bought it for a man who thought so."

"H'm. How much, if it's a fair question?"

"Two thousand."

The R.A. stared.

"Good Lord, man!" he cried. "You're not serious? The original of that picture is worth, perhaps, £1,200. This" — he tapped the painting on his knee — "is worth, well, say £40 at the outside limit."

Mr. Lumley felt the bottom dropping out of his world.

"I don't understand the thing any more than you do," he answered slowly. "I was commissioned to buy this particular picture. I was told I might give two thousand or three, or practically anything that was asked, but I was to get the thing."

"I suppose it was a confidential deal?"

"Well, yes, I'm afraid so; but it would not be a breach of confidence to say it was for an American of the *nouveau riche* type."

Dobbs tossed his head contemptuously.

"That explains it," he said with a short laugh. And then the talk drifted into other channels.

But though Mr. Lumley felt no responsibility for a mistake, had such been made, there still remained in his mind an uneasy feeling about the whole affair. And later on the same evening he made a discovery which perturbed him still further.

He was wrestling with the problem of how Snaith, a man who had visited most of the galleries of Europe, could

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have failed to know that the original was in the Louvre. And then he recollected that this puzzle was not confined to the American. Snaith had not trusted his own judgment. He had consulted the best authority on pictures of whom he knew in London — Mitchell of Pall Mall. Mitchell's name was unfamiliar to Mr. Lumley, but at all events he must be an authority, and — Mitchell had not known either.

He wondered what kind of standing Mitchell possessed, and, after reaching his office and locking up the dispatch-case in his safe, he took up his directory to see if he could gain any light on the point. And he did, but not the kind of light he expected. There was no one in Pall Mall of that name!

Mr. Lumley whistled. From experiencing a slight dissatisfaction he was now thoroughly uneasy.

He locked his office and, with a feeling of gratified surprise at the manner in which he was rising to an unexpected emergency, he drove to one of the large hotels on the Embankment much frequented by wealthy Americans. Here he was able to borrow a directory of New York. He looked up Snaith. There was no Silas S. Snaith mentioned either on Fifth Avenue or anywhere else.

"Hoaxed!" Mr. Lumley whispered to himself, as he wiped the perspiration off his forehead. "The whole thing's a plant. There is no Snaith. There is no Mitchell. That man's story was a yarn. But what in the name of goodness is the game?"

He sat on in the hotel reading-room buried in thought. And gradually little things, noted subconsciously at the time and forgotten, returned to his memory and became definite mental pictures. Though he had hardly realized it during the interview, Snaith had puzzled him — not Snaith's story, but Snaith himself, his personality. His language, his bearing, all, Mr. Lumley now saw, had been inconsistent. At one time he had been ultra-American in an out-of-date sort of way; he had, for example, talked the American of the dime novel or the screen, while at another his English had been as good as Mr. Lumley's own. The more the commission agent thought it over the more suspicious he became that Snaith was concealing his identity — that he was not, in fact, an American at all.

As he turned the matter over in his mind, a possible solution suddenly struck him. Could it be that Snaith meditated an attempt to steal the original from the Louvre? He had certainly spoken of a visit to Paris. Could his plan be to destroy Lord Arthur's picture, and to swear that the treasure he had stolen had been purchased from his lordship? If so, he would be able to support his story by incontrovertible evidence of the sale. Yes, Mr. Lumley concluded, this theory certainly represented a possibility.

And if so, there was the equal pos-

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sibility that he, Lumley, was assisting in a crime. How could he test the matter? How satisfy himself?

He decided to go down to Scotland Yard, tell his story, and do what he was there advised. Responsibility for the sequel would then be off his shoulders.

He glanced at his watch. It was just ten o'clock. Leaving the hotel, he drove along the Embankment to the Yard.

"I want to see the Inspector on duty," he demanded.

He was shown into a small office, and there a tall, quiet-mannered, efficient-looking man asked him his business.

"I have had, Mr. Inspector, a somewhat unusual experience," began Mr. Lumley. "I don't in the least know that anything is wrong, but the circumstances are suspicious, and I felt I ought to let your people know, so that you could form your own opinion."

"Very right, sir. Perhaps you will tell me the facts."

Mr. Lumley began to recount his adventures. The Inspector listened courteously but impassively till Lord Arthur's name was mentioned. Then a sudden gleam of interest came into his eyes, and he gave his visitor his undivided attention. But he did not interrupt, allowing Mr. Lumley to finish his story in his own way.

"You have made a very clear statement, sir," he said when the other ceased speaking, "and I should like to congratulate you on your wisdom in reporting to us. I think it probable that you'll find yourself justified. Excuse me a moment."

He left the room, returning in a few minutes with another official, who carried a large file of papers.

"This is Inspector Niblock," he said, "and though I couldn't tell until I had heard it, I fancy he will be even more interested in your statement than I was. Would it be too much to ask you to repeat it to him?"

For the second time Mr. Lumley related his experiences. While the first Inspector had shown interest in the story, Niblock scarcely covered up actual excitement with the cloak of professional calm. He repeated his colleague's congratulations and then turned to the file of papers. From it he drew a number of photographs and handed them to Lumley.

"Have a look over those, sir, will you?" he invited.

Mr. Lumley took the cards. They were portraits of a number of quite ordinary-looking men and women. Mildly surprised, he turned them over. And then his surprise became astonishment, for there, on the fourth card, was a full-length view of Mr. Silas S. Snaith.

"Seen him before?" asked Niblock, chuckling and rubbing his hands. "I think you've done a better stroke of business than you know, Mr. Lumley." He became serious in a moment and continued: "And now let us lay our plans, for there must be no bungling in this affair."

The two Inspectors spoke in under-

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tones for a few moments. Then Niblock turned.

"You say the picture is now in your safe, Mr. Lumley? I presume it is in precisely the same state as when you took it down from Lord Arthur's study wall?"

"Precisely."

"We must get hold of it at once. Will you come to your office now and let us have it? You can keep the taxi and drive on home."

The three men left the great building and, hailing a vehicle, were driven to Mr. Lumley's place of business. The latter led his companions to his private room where, after pulling down the blinds, he produced the dispatch-case. In a moment the detectives were examining the picture.

"We'll borrow it, as well as this case," said Niblock as he carefully repacked it. "You may expect us back with it at about five tomorrow. Where does that door lead to?"

"A filing-room."

"The very thing. You can, perhaps, let us withdraw into that room, so that if your interview with Snaith does not go satisfactorily we shall be able to give you assistance. That's all tonight, I think."

Mr. Lumley begged for further information, but Niblock refused it on the ground that the agent's display of ignorance would be more convincing to Snaith if it were genuine.

"If," the Inspector added, "by some chance he should come before his time, you will tell him that the picture has been left at your bank for safe keeping, but that it will be in your hands before six. If we find him here on our arrival, we shall assume the rôle of bank officials."

Next evening Mr. Lumley was once more seated in his private room, when, shortly after five, the two Inspectors entered, accompanied by a sergeant in uniform.

"There is the picture," said Niblock, after brief greetings had been exchanged, "untouched, except that we have had to put it in a new frame. By an unfortunate accident I dropped it, with the result that the corner of the frame was split and the gilding damaged. You will see here what has happened."

The Inspector undid a brown paper parcel and brought to light the old frame, split, as he had said, at one corner.

"Should Mr. Snaith observe that the frame has been changed," he continued, "you will describe the accident, though saying it happened with yourself. You will express regret for your carelessness, and you will say that you kept the old frame for his inspection. Now let us into your filing-room, for you must be alone when your visitor comes."

The three police officers stepped into the small back chamber, and the door was almost, but not completely, closed. Mr. Lumley, nervous and considerably perturbed, sat writing at his desk. He did not know what form the coming interview was to take, and he was considerably annoyed that the officers had not taken

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him more fully into their confidence. He felt that if he only knew what to expect, he would be in a better position to meet it.

The minutes passed slowly — so slowly that more than once Mr. Lumley put his watch to his ear to make sure that it was still ticking. But at last six o'clock came, and Mr. Snaith was announced.

"Say, but your railroads want hustling some," was his greeting as he stepped breezily into the room. "I've just got in from Paris, only forty minutes late." He sat down and opened his heavy coat, then went on with more than a trace of anxiety in his tone: "And how has the deal gone?"

"Got it through, Mr. Snaith, I am glad to say, and with very little trouble. But one thing is rather upsetting. Lord Arthur says the picture isn't genuine — it's only a copy."

Snaith looked up sharply.

"But you have it all right — here?" he asked, and in spite of an obvious effort, there was eagerness in his voice.

"Yes; it's in my safe. But when he said it was a copy, I was doubtful ——"

"That's all right. I thought he mightn't know. Don't worry yourself any. All you've to do is to give me the picture and get your money, and the deal's O.K. What did you pay him?"

"Two thousand, but he said he would refund it if you found the picture was a copy and returned it within a month."

"Did he so? Well, now, that was very considerate of him. Let's have the thing, anyhow."

Mr. Lumley rose and, unlocking the safe, took from it the dispatch-case and laid it on the desk before his visitor. With an eagerness that he could no longer control, Snaith withdrew the picture and, his hands trembling with excitement, tore off the tissue covering. For a moment he gazed at the picture with a gloating satisfaction; then his face changed.

"This is not it!" he cried sharply, and his eyes searched Mr. Lumley's face with a look in which suspicion turned rapidly to menace. "By the Lord, if you try to pull any stuff on me, I'll make you wish you had never been born! What's the meaning of it?"

Mr. Lumley, fortified by the knowledge of the presence of his other visitors, took a more lofty tone than he otherwise might have essayed.

"Really, Mr. Snaith," he answered in cold tones, "you forget yourself. I am not accustomed to be spoken to in that way. When you apologize I'll continue the conversation, not before."

For a moment it seemed as if Snaith would resort to violence. Then an idea seemed to strike him, and he controlled himself with an obvious effort and spoke again.

"No offense — no offense," he growled irritably. "You're so plaguey set on your dignity. But explain. That's not Lord Arthur's picture."

"That *is* Lord Arthur's picture," Mr. Lumley asserted stoutly.

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"Then you've been monkeying with it. It's not the frame."

"It's not the frame, I know, and if you had been more civil I should express greater regret. As a matter of fact, I dropped the picture — most carelessly, I admit — but it slipped——"

Snaith's gaze had fixed itself on Mr. Lumley with a dreadful intensity. At last, unable to control himself any longer, he burst out:

"Darn it all, man, get to the point, can't you! Where is the frame now?"

"It's here. As I was saying, I dropped the picture and damaged the corner of the frame. I got it reframed, but the old frame was sent back also."

Mr. Snaith sat back limply and wiped his forehead.

"Why the blazes couldn't you say so at once?" he growled. "I'll have the old frame too."

Mr. Lumley turned back to his safe.

"There," he said, quite rudely for him; "I hope you're satisfied that's the right one."

Snaith took the frame and examined it minutely. Then he turned it over and looked at the back. For a moment he remained motionless, then he hurled it on to the desk and sprang to his feet with an inarticulate snarl, his face livid with rage and disappointment.

"You thief!" he yelled with a bitter oath. "You — thief! If you don't shell out within ten seconds I'll send you straight to hell!" and the appalled Mr. Lumley found himself gazing directly into the bore of an automatic pistol.

But at that moment there was an interruption. A quiet voice broke in:

"Now, none of that, Mr. William Jenkins — none of that. It's on to you this time, I guess. Put it down and give in like a man when you're beaten."

Snaith, thunderstruck, turned to see the two Inspectors covering him with their revolvers. His jaw dropped. For a moment it seemed as if he were going to show fight; then slowly his fingers relaxed and the pistol fell on the desk.

"The darbies, Hughes," went on Niblock; "and then we can put our toys away and have a chat."

Snaith seemed utterly dumfounded, and he made no resistance as the sergeant first pocketed the pistol and then handcuffed him.

When he was rendered harmless, Niblock turned to Mr. Lumley.

"I'm sorry, sir," he said courteously, "for having had to submit you to this, but we had to let him demonstrate before witnesses that he was after the frame, and not the picture. Thanks to you, sir, he has done that pretty completely." He turned to the prisoner. "I have to warn you, Jenkins, that whatever you say may be used in evidence against you, but at the same time, if you wish to make a statement I will take it."

The prisoner, apparently stupefied at the sudden turning of the tables, made no reply.

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"In that case," Niblock resumed, "we had better get away. With your permission, we'll take the picture and frame, Mr. Lumley, and later explain anything that may still be puzzling you."

Two days later Mr. Lumley called at the Yard in response to an invitation from Inspector Niblock. There he met the two Inspectors and their Chief, as well as Lord Arthur Wentworth. As Mr. Lumley entered the room, the latter sprang to his feet and came forward with outstretched hand.

"And this is the man to whom I owe so much," he cried warmly. "Allow me, my dear sir, to express my great gratitude and appreciation of your actions."

His lordship beamed as he pumped Mr. Lumley's hand up and down.

"But," said Mr. Lumley in some embarrassment, "I can assure you, Lord Arthur, that I am still in ignorance of what I have done."

"You will soon know all about it. Tell him, Inspector. You are better up in the details than I."

"Mr. Lumley, sir," began Niblock, leaning forward and tapping the desk with his forefinger, "your friend, Mr. Dobbs, valued that picture at about £40, and Snaith or Jenkins at £2,000." The Inspector's voice became very impressive. "They were both wrong. The actual value of that picture was £45,000!"

Mr. Lumley gasped.

"And would you like to see what gave it its value?" went on Niblock, evidently relishing mightily the sensation he was creating. He opened a drawer in his desk, took out a little box, and out of it poured on to the table what seemed a stream of silvery light.

"Pearls! A necklace!" ejaculated Mr. Lumley.

"A necklace, yes," went on Niblock. "More than that. *The* necklace. Lady Wentworth's celebrated pearl necklace, valued at £45,000, and which was stolen from her over six months ago."

"I remember," cried Mr. Lumley helplessly. "I read of it at the time. But how——?" He looked his question.

"I'll tell you, sir. Some nine or ten months ago Lord Arthur took on a footman, a young man named William Jenkins. He proved himself a capable servant, and seemed eminently respectable and trustworthy. He was your Silas S. Snaith.

"Some three months after he arrived, there was a big dance at Wentworth Hall, at which her ladyship intended to wear her necklace. Lord Arthur took it from his safe and handed it to her about 7 p.m. She did not wear it at dinner, which was a comparatively hurried affair, but left it in a drawer of her dressing-table. When she went up about 8:30 to dress for the ball it was gone.

"The alarm was immediately given, and a private detective, who was in attendance, took charge. Police were telephoned for and a ring was made

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round the house, and no one was allowed to leave unless vouched for. The guests were by this time arriving, but the matter was hushed up and the dance went on.

"In the searching inquiry that followed, suspicion at first fell on Jenkins, as being the newcomer. It was further shown that he was out of observation for five minutes between 7 and 8 p.m., in which time he could have visited Lady Wentworth's room. But it was also shown that he could not possibly have left the house nor communicated with an accomplice outside. Therefore, as none of the pearls had come into the market, we came to the conclusion that the thief had hidden them in some place about the house. But the most careful search failed to reveal them.

"You may understand then, sir," Inspector Niblock continued, bowing to Mr. Lumley, "that when I heard that a man of the description of Jenkins was offering a huge sum of money for a valueless picture from the study of Wentworth Hall, I became interested, and when you selected Jenkins from the Hall servants I became more interested still. My colleague and I got the picture from you, and we found that a groove had been cut right round the back of the frame and filled with putty, in which was embedded the necklace. We removed the pearls and fixed up the test with that frame, to make sure it was that he was after. I may say that Jenkins has confessed.

"It appears he is an old friend of Lucille, her ladyship's maid, and she had often spoken in his hearing about the necklace. He had determined to have a try for it, believing he could sell the pearls singly and in different places. He made friends with the butler, got his support, and so his job. He had decided he could never get directly away with the swag, so he looked round for a hiding-place, eventually choosing the frame of this picture. The hiding-place was prepared for weeks beforehand.

"On the evening of the dance Lucille told him the necklace was to be worn. He pumped her as to its resting-place, and while everyone was at dinner, he slipped up to her ladyship's room, snatched up the necklace, ran to the study, and hid it in the prepared hiding-place.

"He lay low while the search continued, but three months later gave in his notice and left. He had then to find some way of getting the picture. He could not go to the Hall himself, as he would be known, and I think it really is not easy to devise a better plan than that he adopted."

It remains only to be told that Mr. Lumley shortly became the happy recipient of those same notes for £2,000 which he had handed to Lord Arthur, together with a check for the promised reward of £1,000, his lordship holding that of all concerned the commission agent had the best rights to the money.

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

Vinnie Williams's "A Matter of the Tax Payers' Money" is one of the eleven "first stories" which won special awards in last year's contest. The letter accompanying the manuscript was addressed to Ellery Queen, and began: "I bet the enclosed is one of the few — if any — stories you've read written around welfare workers. [The author is right: it may even be the first story we've ever read with a social service background.] The 'sleuth,' so-called, is a rural welfare worker in Florida — but not one of the sleeker college-girl types. She's an 'old fox,' as her supervisor calls her." The author, Mrs. Roy R. Williams, went on to say that the details of the story are accurate. Indeed, they impressed us as authentic beyond any capacity on our part even to quibble. There is a realism in the material and in the characters which comes only from first-hand knowledge of the subject matter — just as the spicy, homely, grass-roots, regional-American, ring-of-truth dialogue has the stamp of authenticity which comes only from having heard these people speak in real-life, and having the dialect-ear to remember and record. And the simple truth is that Vinnie Williams did do welfare work in rural Florida — mostly north of Lake Okeechobie — for five years.

When we wrote to Mrs. Williams to tell her that we had selected her story — well, suppose we let the author speak for herself. "I haven't been so obfuscated since I ran into that farrow of hogs a year ago down near Sarasota. [We couldn't have composed that sentence if our lives had depended on it!] No, I've never had a story published before, because I never did any writing before — except welfare case reports. Six months ago my husband bought me a portable typewriter and sicked me at the box full of old welfare forms I'd saved to use as stationery.

"As for my background, I graduated from Florida State University in 1941, with a B.A. in sociology . . . I'm what my last supervisor calls 'a natural bo'n cracker worker,' because I'm a cracker myself and can talk in terms of mustard pickles, frog gigging, Indian Mustang Oil, and outhouses. They once put me to work in St. Petersburg for six months, and I nearly had a breakdown because city folks were just too quick for me."

Mrs. Williams was born in Charleston, South Carolina, but moved to Florida at the age of 14. She and her husband ("he's a Georgia cracker") are now living in Red Bank, New Jersey ("stranded in Yankeeland"), where Mr. Williams, an Army man, is now stationed. But they both have their

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fingers crossed, hoping he'll be transferred to the South. During her exile in the North, however, Mrs. Williams could not put her time to better use than to continue the saga of Miss Minnie Boyd who, in the author's own words, is "composed of three parts bloodhound in order to be able to decide if applicants for public assistance actually need help — or if they have vast bank balances hidden in their mattresses."

A MATTER OF THE TAX PAYERS' MONEY

by VINNIE WILLIAMS

MRS. CARLTON, supervisor of the Welfare Office at Mangoville, leaned back in her chair and shook her handsome head.

"Minnie, I'm sorry, but I don't believe a word you're saying. Talking of leaving the agency after fifteen years —"

"I should have took off five years ago." Miss Minnie Boyd stared at the cigarette stub she held pinched in a bobby pin, her sun-crinkled eyes serious. "I'm not denying it's going to be sort of queer not running all over Florida and sticking my nose into other folks' affairs, but I'm forty-five, Selma, and it seems like I just don't have the get-up-and-get I used to. And jouncing around the woods in the old jalopy — well, I reckon I don't have the bones I used to either."

"We can transfer you to town."

"Nope, when I clear up my work, I'm quitting. I've got the farm and enough to nudge along on. The agency is getting in more young college girls every year, and that's as it should be. They've got the pep. What do we old workers have? Maybe a little experience, some pecky bits of know-how —"

"But Minnie," Mrs. Carlton leaned forward, eyes earnest; "those pecky bits of know-how are valuable. They're what the agency needs. Young workers are fine — but what do the crackers say? — 'A young fox for running, an old fox for cunning.' It's the same thing." She broke off as Miss Minnie shook her gray head. "Oh, all right." The supervisor ruffled unhappily through a stack of case folders. "Well, how much work do you have on hand?"

Miss Minnie consulted a dog-eared notebook. "Three Old Age Assistance case studies, one Aid to the Blind, one Aid to Dependent Children, and a flock of reviews. About twenty of them."

Mrs. Carlton touched a manicured finger to her conch paperweight, and a twinkle appeared in her eyes.

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"Um — Miss Minnie, do you know a Mrs. Annie Smith, an OAA client out in Possum Trot?"

"That's one of Madge's clients, isn't it? A widow, very self-reliant, religious —"

"Madge describes her as —" Mrs. Carlton leafed pages, " 'a good Christian old soul who hates sin, weeds, and chicken ticks.' " She closed the record. "That's why this anonymous note we got this morning surprised me. Seems Mrs. Smith is working at Jut's jook joint."

"Nothing surprises me any more," said Miss Minnie, brushing ashes from her shabby skirt, "but if Mrs. Smith hates sin, she's lending aid to Sodom and Gomorrah. The sheriff's been on Jut's tail for months for everything from rustling beef to coloring corn with iodine." She sighed. "I reckon the note means Madge will have to go out in the name of the Florida tax payer and harry the poor old soul."

"Minnie, sometimes I think you're a renegade at heart. You know perfectly well the public assistance laws say that grants are only temporary measures of relief, and that when a client has an adequate income, he or she is no longer eligible for help." She paused aghast. "Good Lord, there I go making lecture noises again. . . . To return to Mrs. Smith, Madge is still laid up with the flu, and this job of Mrs. Smith's — if any — should be checked right off. I don't like to give you extra work when you're trying to clear up your load, but I'd appreciate it if you'd stop at Possum Trot and check." She passed the folder across the desk. "I put the anonymous note in the front. Funny thing, Madge says Mrs. Smith came in about three weeks ago for a raise. Funny, because she's one of those economical old souls who always seem to manage on their grants. So if she's had to take a job, something is seriously wrong."

Miss Minnie nodded. "I'll read the record, and try to drop by and see her early next week."

Back in her small cubbyhole Miss Minnie listened for a moment to the murmur of the stenographers' voices in the big main office next door, the clatter of typewriters, and the slam of filing cabinet drawers. She sighed. She would miss all this, no doubt of it.

She put on her steel-rimmed reading glasses and opened Mrs. Smith's record. It was thick, dating back to 1932, the ERA days. Mango county had always been a poor county. The only people who hadn't been on relief at one time or another were a few of the professional men and the big ranchers to the south.

Mrs. Smith's first contact with the agency had been a note asking for commodities for herself and her twenty-five-year old son. The son had later been certified for WPA, but apparently was shiftless and a troublemaker.

Miss Minnie said, "Tch!" and read steadily through the rest of the record, finishing with the anonymous note.

It didn't say much, just: "You folks

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ought to know, Mrs. Annie Smith of Possum Trot has herself a job at Jut's jook joint," but Miss Minnie found it absorbing. She reread it several times, then stared unseeingly out of her window at the little Gulf coast town lying clean and tropical in the sun.

Miss Minnie had changed her mind. The note made it necessary for her to visit Mrs. Smith that very afternoon.

She did not reach Possum Trot until after four o'clock. It had been a tough day. Unexpected problems like new babies, sickness, jobs, and leaks in roofs had cropped up. Then she had been delayed some time at Miley's Crossroad Store by Sheriff Pete Cosey. The sheriff had insisted on telling her in detail his efforts at rounding up the person or gang responsible for three burglaries during the last month.

"I tell you I've covered this here county tail and mane, but I ain't seen a person slick enough to pull off anything like them robberies. I tell you, Miss Minnie, it's the work of some big-city gang. They got the tools and they're slick!"

"I wouldn't doubt it," Miss Minnie had murmured, "but you'll catch them, sheriff."

Mrs. Annie Smith's farm was on a sand trail winding off the Tamiami Trail through the piney woods, a weather-beaten clapboard house in an oak grove, the roof blanketed with flame vine. There was a turnip and yam patch to one side, a chicken yard to the other, and an outhouse screened with scarlet bougainvillea behind.

Miss Minnie nosed her shabby sedan to a stop under a chinaberry tree and got out, her dress sticking to her with sweat. Her short thick body ached in every joint from the jarring sand ruts, and her eyes smarted.

"Evening," an old woman called from the porch. Faded blue eyes smiled from under the brim of a woven palmetto hat, bare brown feet peered from under an old gingham dress.

"Evening." Miss Minnie forced her tired legs up the path to the porch. "Mrs. Smith? I'm Miss Minnie Boyd from the Welfare Office."

The old woman's smile faded. Her small thin body went still. "Why, I'm — I'm real pleased to meet you. Won't you come in and set?"

"Thanks." Miss Minnie followed her into the dim living room. How many parlors had she seen like this, the stone fireplace with the shotgun bracketed above, the deer horns, the ponderous family Bible, the stiff family portraits.

One thing was unusual. There were a dozen or more pictures of children cut from magazines tacked on the walls.

Miss Minnie smiled, "I see you're partial to children."

Mrs. Smith's face lighted. "Yes'm, I purely love the lil' boogers. The way I figger it, us old folks has made a sorry lob-lolly of the world, and I got them pictures tacked up to sort of remind me the Lord still loves this

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pore sinful race when he lets children go on being born." She broke off abruptly. "Won't you set, Ma'm?"

"Thanks." Miss Minnie avoided a cushioned chair, took a straight one. Welfare workers are taught early to be leery of the small biting things which may lurk in upholstery. "It's too bad you're all alone, liking children that way."

Mrs. Smith took off the palmetto hat and smoothed her white hair. She sat primly on the edge of a chair, feet tucked under her.

"Yes'm, it sure is. I — I reckon you all know, I had a boy. He had him a good job riding range, but he got in a cutting scrape and took off for Tampy. Died ten years back, may the Lord have mercy on him."

Miss Minnie shook her head sadly, waited a second, and said, "Well, I don't want to take up too much of your time, Mrs. Smith. I just dropped by to see how you were getting on."

"Why, I'm toughing it out. I seen Miss Madge last month, and she went over my situation, groceries and kerosene and taxes and clothes and such like as that, and said she couldn't give me no raise 'cause they hadn't changed none."

"That's what I came to see you about. Mrs. Carlton thought you might have gotten in a tight. I'll be real honest with you, Mrs. Smith. We got a note this morning saying you were working at Jut's Place."

The old lady started up. "Hit's a lie! I ain't neither! 'Sides, Preacher Davis would have a pure nanny if he heerd I was messing around a sinbesotten place like that. . . . Anyway, no one would give me work. They — they say I'm too old like."

So she *had* been looking for work. Miss Minnie's face did not indicate this guess. She said, "What do you suppose gave someone the idea you were working at Jut's?"

"Well — I been there a few times. I ain't denying that. But it's only to piece a quilt for a new gal there, Belle."

"I didn't know Jut had taken on a new girl. Where's she from?"

Mrs. Smith's eyes dropped. She pleated her apron meticulously. "Jut says as how she's his niece from Jacksonville."

Miss Minnie said dryly, "Jut sure has a heap of nieces." She rose. "Well, I guess that's all."

Outside the sunshine was brilliant saffron after the dim room. Squirrels and cardinals quarreled in the oaks, a lean gray cat slept among potted plants on the porch rail. A smell of grapes, sharp and aromatic, came from the woods.

Miss Minnie glanced around, thinking again there was no place as peaceful as the scrub. Her gaze fell on the chicken yard, vaguely, then sharpened.

She said, after a moment, "You know, Mrs. Smith, Madge and the other visitors all mentioned a broach you wore, a garnet and pearl pin. I'm real interested in old jewelry. I'd love to see it."

Red crept under the old woman's

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wrinkled face. "Why, I'd sure be proud to show it to you, Miz Boyd, but — but the fact is it's put away down in my trunk and —"

Miss Minnie said quickly, "That's all right. . . . Well, goodbye."

"Goodbye. I'm real glad you come. Like I always tell Preacher Davis, there ain't no one so nice or so smart as you welfare gals."

Miss Minnie smiled queerly as she drove back along the sand trail. Smart. Well, maybe.

It was nearly five o'clock when she reached town, so she did not bother to go to the office. She drove straight to her boarding house, leaving her car outside. Inside she made a short phone call, hung up the receiver looking thoughtful, then took it down again. She gave a number.

"Selma? This is Minnie. I'm calling from home. I'm not coming back to the office, because I've got to make a visit this evening . . . I saw Mrs. Smith."

"Well, that was quick. Is she working?"

"She says not. She says she's been to Jut's Place, but only to piece a quilt for one of the hostesses, a 'niece' of Jut's. She's been looking for a job though; she let it out unintentionally."

"Why, I always thought she managed so well on her grant and what she made from her chickens."

"That's something else. The record says she's always had a lot of chickens. When Madge saw her last month, she had about sixty. I looked today. Now she's only got about two dozen."

"Did you ask her what happened to the others?"

"No, because I learned something else. She doesn't have that garnet and pearl broach of hers any more."

"Minnie —"

"Just a second. There's something else. The record said she was a pretty constant snuff dipper. She told one visitor that outside of church, snuff was her one pleasure in life. Well, she didn't use it today, and what's more, she hasn't for several days. There weren't any stains on her lips or fingers."

"I gather you're saying she needs money, and that she's sold the chickens and broach."

"Uh-huh, but I made a final check to be sure. I just phoned her preacher. She's an Adventist, you know, and those folks believe in tithing one-tenth of their income to the church. Well, Preacher Davis says Mrs. Smith hasn't been to church — or tithed — in a month."

"Minnie — now hold your horses. You're about to get me all worked up. So she needs money. Well, she's not the first client who did — so what are you getting so tense about?"

Miss Minnie rubbed her smarting eyes, said slowly, "I think the old lady's in trouble. That's why I thought I'd take a run out to Jut's tonight."

"Minnie, that's not necessary! You can just as well wait until next week."

"I don't think so. You know that anonymous letter we got?"

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"What about it?"

"Did you notice the handwriting? Mrs. Smith wrote it herself."

Jut's Place was on the Tamiami Trail, a few miles south of town. It was about seven o'clock, still light, when Miss Minnie nosed her sedan to a stop in the parking lot, between a mule cart and a 1929 Dodge.

Friday night was Mango county's night to howl. There were already a sprinkle of cars in the lot, and several horses stood patient and dusty by the hitching rail. A red neon sign flashed on the roof, and *Bad Blood Blues* blared from the jook organ.

Miss Minnie paused at the hitching rail to pat a familiar black and white pinto. "Hi, feller, Jimmie Bee here already?"

The pinto whinnied, and Miss Minnie went on in.

The jook was a square, clapboard building with high naked rafters, dimly lit. Most of it was given over to tables and booths surrounding a railed-in dance floor and a blaring jook organ. Off to one side was a small, dim bar. Miss Minnie, gray-haired and respectably shabby, headed for it.

The tall lantern-jawed cracker behind the bar looked up as she entered. There was a black stubble on his chin and a matching black rim under his nails. His small bloodshot eyes widened, then narrowed.

"Well, Miss Minnie, I ain't seen you in a coon's age," he said in a high nasal voice, sidling forward. "Where you been?"

Miss Minnie laid her worn purse on the bar, said dryly: "Now don't go making out I'm a customer of this snake-hole of yours, Jut."

A downy-faced young cowboy down the bar leaned forward, his thin face a-grin under a half-bushel pumpkin hat.

"Hi, Miss Minnie, you taking to jooking?"

"You keep a soft tongue in your head, Jimmie Bee. . . . I saw your pinto outside."

The young cowboy said proudly, "Purtiest hoss in the county."

Jut moved restively. "Now, Miss Minnie, I wasn't throwing off on you. I was jes cur'ous how come you was here."

Miss Minnie ignored him, looking at the waitresses scurrying across the dance floor, serving customers. She spotted a new face.

"I see you got yourself a new 'niece,' Jut."

The jook man's face was sullen. He laid huge knobby hands on the bar, powerful veined hands that were out of keeping with his pale gauntness.

"Now, listen, Miss Minnie, you ain't got nothing on me concerning Belle. She's her own woman, full-growed, with a kid. If you're figuring on raising sand —"

"I'm not figuring on raising anything. Give me a coke, then call her over."

The man hesitated, then slowly got a bottled coke out of the ice chest, opened it, and slid it forward. His eyes slid furtively to Miss Minnie's

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placid sun-burned face, slid away. He raised his voice over the blare of the jook organ.

"Belle! Hey, Belle, c'm in here, will you?"

The blonde girl turned from a booth and leisurely sauntered into the bar, balancing a tray of empty bottles and glasses on her shoulder. She was in her early thirties, hard lines around her mouth, her hair platinum-blonde, a spit curl on one temple. Her skin was dark, and there were brown stains under her black eyes.

"What you want, Jut?"

Jut jerked his head. "Miss Minnie Boyd from the Welfare Office. She wanted to meet you."

The woman stared at Miss Minnie, slammed her tray on the bar. She swung back, glaring, a hand on her hip. "Now, listen, you nosy busybody, if it's about the kid, I'll have you know she's going to school every day and —"

Miss Minnie said equably, "It's not. Do you know a Mrs. Annie Smith?"

The girl hesitated, said warily, "I've met her."

Miss Minnie said mendaciously, "She says she's making some dresses for you. I just wanted to check on it."

The girl stared and burst into harsh laughter. "Sure, she's making some dresses for me. Seeing as how I ain't been able to get to Maas Brothers lately, she's been whipping me up a coupla bungalow aprons. So what?"

Miss Minnie smiled. "Why, nothing. Thanks."

The girl hesitated, a line between her thin black brows. Jut leaned forward.

"Belle, there's one of them cowboys heading this way, wanting to ask you to dance."

The girl cursed briefly, "Those cowboys and their high heels —" She plunged through a curtained doorway behind the bar.

The cowboy, a hulking youth in dusty jeans, with the slack wet-lipped appearance of one who has drunk too many whiskeys with lemon-pop chasers, halted and made his slow way back to the dance floor.

Jut leaned forward grinning. "Belle just purely hates dancing with cowboys. She —" He broke off, glaring at the corner of the bar. "Bessie, what you doing down here? Ain't your Ma and me told you to stay upstairs? You march yourself right back up, you hear?"

Miss Minnie turned. A small girl was standing at the corner of the bar, a grave-eyed child of about seven, her black hair skinned back in two pigtails, thin shoulders erect and sturdy in a too-small dress.

Her voice came in a grave treble. "I got lonesome. I heard the music —"

"Ne' mind that! You git!"

The child turned and mounted the flight of stairs behind the bar which led, Miss Minnie knew, to some shabby rooms upstairs.

She turned her eyes to Jut. "Belle's child?"

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"Yeah."

The jook was filling up rapidly, the screen door slamming as new couples came in. A solitary cowboy entered the bar. He resembled a dozen others: the slightly bowed shoulders, the faded dungarees tucked into high-heeled boots, the shambling gait. His face was hidden in the shadow of the wide-brimmed black slouch hat pulled low over his eyes.

He mounted a stool in the shadows at the end of the bar, tucking gloves into his belt. He beckoned Jut, muttered:

"Scotch and water."

Jut nodded and poured him a drink from a dusty bottle. Miss Minnie glanced at the strong hands matted with black hair, the thick jaw half-turned from her. Black hair curled from under the hat in back.

Miss Minnie got up. Jut came forward.

"On the house, Miss Minnie."

Miss Minnie said dryly, "Thanks, I'll pay." She put a nickel on the bar, gestured. "Who's the new cowpoke?"

Jut shrugged. "Calls hisself Arcadia. Reckon he's from down that way."

The curtained doorway rippled, and Belle reappeared. She seemed to have regained her good humor. She was smiling a little and humming a song. Her black eyes fell on the cowboy, and she stopped abruptly.

"Well," she said shrilly. "It's high time you got here. Where you been? You know the joint gets crowded this late. Look, I got some more dough —"

The man muttered, "Shut up!" He rose, grasped her arm. "Come on," and he shoved her up the stairs.

Miss Minnie went outside, pocketbook under her arm. Darkness had closed down on the scrub, and the night was filled with the smell of night-blooming jasmine and smoke. The moon rode low over the pines.

The neon sign on the jook lighted the parking lot. Miss Minnie passed slowly down the line of horses, patting the pinto. A new horse was tied to the rail, a sturdy bay, dusty and drooping. Miss Minnie put a gentle hand on his neck, edged him into the light. A Bar W brand was burned on his left flank. That was Jess Whidden's outfit, twelve miles south. No wonder the horse looked tired.

Suddenly Miss Minnie grinned in the dark. "Bay," she drawled, "you look mighty beat-down. You belong to have a little rest."

She untied him and coaxed him back through the lot. A little path ran down into the woods behind the jook. Miss Minnie led the horse some distance along the path, then tied him to a tree. She patted him again and returned to her car.

She had to wait half an hour, but finally the swarthy cowboy appeared. He started for the hitching rail, halted abruptly. Miss Minnie could not see his face, but the curse came clearly. The man hesitated a moment, glancing about, appeared to think. Then he moved swiftly toward the horses, looked them over, and unhitched the pinto. A moment later drumming hoofs vanished in the dark.

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Miss Minnie nodded and got out of the car. Jut looked up in surprise as she re-entered the bar.

"I forgot to make a phone call," she explained, and went into the booth in the corner, carefully closing the door after her.

She made two of them. When she finally emerged, she stood for a moment rubbing her eyes, tiredness weighing her down. She did not even see one of her ADC children, a fifteen-year-old girl, hastily ducking into the shadows.

She got her car, drove straight home, and went to bed.

The next morning she was a little late for the office. She stopped to get a copy of the *Tampa Morning News*, and walking slowly, scanned the front page. One item especially interested her. She mounted the grimy staircase to the Welfare Office, reading it.

The senior stenographer met her at the door, her florid face worried.

"Minnie Boyd, what you been up to anyway? Mrs. Carlton has been sending out calls for you every two minutes, and the sheriff is in her office, just yelling."

Miss Minnie tucked the paper under her arm. "I'll go right in."

She knocked on Mrs. Carlton's door and pushed it open. Mrs. Carlton was sitting upright at her desk, her handsome brow furrowed, watching Sheriff Pete Cosey striding up and down the office waving his arms.

" . . . like I said, all I know is I got this call from Minnie and she said a cowboy had stole Jimmie Bee's pinto and was riding back to the Whidden ranch on him. She said to waylay him a couple miles south of the ranch before he could abandon the horse, and to watch out because he was dangerous. So that's what me and Doxie done — and dang if she wasn't right! The bugger done just like she said. When me and Doxie hailed him, he went for a gun. Doxie winged him, and then we closed in and searched him. You could have knocked me flatter'n a gopher when we found out who he was."

Miss Minnie said, "The Tampa paper says he was Zed Adams, alias several names, wanted for murdering a bolita agent last month, but I didn't get a chance to read —"

The sheriff spun. "By God, Minnie Boyd, if I hadn't knowed you fifteen years, I'd swear you'd been holding out on me. How come you knowed that feller was a crook — that him and that wife of his, Belle, was wanted in Tampa?"

Miss Minnie sat down across from Mrs. Carlton who was regarding her with a quizzical gaze. "Well, I knew Belle was Spanish. Her hair was bleached, but you can't hide that olive skin and those brown stains some Spanish folks have under their eyes. And of course she had a *buscanovio*."

The sheriff said, "Bus — what?"

"*Buscanovio*. It's a spit curl some Spanish girls wear on their temples. It's called a looking-for-a-sweetheart curl."

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The sheriff drew a breath. Miss Minnie went on. "And of course I knew he wasn't a real cowboy from Arcadia. For one thing, he was wearing real expensive leather gloves. Most cowboys don't bother much with fripperies like that — especially expensive ones. Then — well, did you ever hear of a cracker cowboy ordering Scotch?"

Mrs. Carlton said wistfully, "In my heyday I dated a few cowboys. It was always beer, or rum, gin or corn washed down with cokes or pop."

"So it was a safe bet they came from a city, probably Tampa. The girl mentioned Maas Brothers department store there. Then before I called you, sheriff, I phoned Jess Whidden. He said he'd hired Arcadia a month ago. It seemed more than a coincidence that Belle and a new cowboy showed up here around the time we were having some big-town type burglaries . . . I saw in the paper that Zed — or Arcadia — served time in Raiford for breaking and entering."

The sheriff said, "That still wasn't no proof he was a crook, all them guesses."

"Well, I wondered why two city folks were burying themselves in the country, and it seemed a safe bet they were hiding out from something. Why not the law? So when I went outside, I hid his horse. If he had been a real cowboy with nothing to hide, he would have raised hell. Instead he simply swiped Jimmie's pinto and took off without a word. So then I was sure."

"Excuse me, Mrs. Carlton," the senior stenographer stuck her head in the door, "Mrs. Annie Smith is outside to see Miss Boyd, and she's looking so funny —"

Miss Minnie rose quickly. "I'd best see her." She glanced at the sheriff. He was wiping his face. Mrs. Carlton grinned and nodded. "But come back when you're finished, Minnie."

Mrs. Smith sat on the edge of one of the waiting-room benches, hands knotted in her lap. She got up as Miss Minnie appeared, her eyes imploring. Today she had changed the palmetto hat and gingham dress for a black straw and old black alpaca with a crocheted collar.

"I — I went to Jut's this morning — to see about the quilt — and I heard — I heard —"

Miss Minnie laid a hand on the thin shoulder. "You don't have anything more to worry about. The sheriff caught both Zed and Belle. They'll be returned to Tampa, and they'll both go to Raiford for good long stretches."

Mrs. Smith's face fell into her hands, her shoulders shook convulsively. Miss Minnie waited. Finally the old woman raised a quivering, tear-stained face.

"I — I didn't know what to do. I would have told the sheriff, but I didn't rightly know just what him and Belle had done; they never let on. Jes' kept a-hounding me for money. I knowed you welfare gals were smart and could figger out something, and — now little Bessie is all alone —"

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"Mrs. Smith, I bet the agency will figure you're just what little Bessie needs now her Ma and Pa are gone. We'll fix it so you can have her, and we'll fix it to raise your grant so you can take care of her, too." Miss Minnie finished soberly. "You're a brave woman, Mrs. Smith."

When she returned to Mrs. Carlton's office, the sheriff was gone and the supervisor was smoking a cigarette, her elegant legs crossed.

She said, "Miss Minnie, I'm a fool." She touched a case record. "I got Mrs. Smith's case out of your office, and I've been looking at it. That crook, Zed Adams — the sheriff said he was sent up ten years ago for breaking and entering." She hesitated. "Mrs. Smith's son died ten years ago —"

"He was dead to her — with her religion. And it was quite a shock to her after all these years when he turned up suddenly with a wife and child. She didn't know what he'd done, but she knew something was wrong, and she was distracted — not for herself or him — but for the child."

"Why do you suppose he picked a ranch for a hide-out? He was raised here. You'd think someone would have recognized him."

"He'd been gone fifteen years, and I guess he took good care to keep out of people's way. He stayed in the shadow at the bar, and Jess Whidden said he kept to himself."

"I suppose Mrs. Smith sold the broach and chickens, scraped up all the money she could for the child."

"Yes, Zed and Belle were collecting money for a real getaway — hence, the robberies. They left Tampa broke, and they used the child to get money from Mrs. Smith. Zed knew how his mother always felt about children."

Mrs. Carlton ran a hand through her modish hair-do, her eyes twinkling.

"Minnie, do you realize you've just undermined the reason you gave for resigning? It was those pecky little bits of information you've collected for fifteen years that helped you figure this thing out."

Miss Minnie rubbed her nose ruefully. "Well, even a blind hog stumbles on a few acorns occasionally."

Mrs. Carlton said, "There's still just one thing I don't understand — why Mrs. Smith sent us that anonymous note about having a job at Jut's."

Miss Minnie grinned, and snapped a bobby pin around her cigarette stub. "Mrs. Smith's a smart woman — and she's known the State Welfare Board for a long time. She knew nothing would send us prying and digging quicker than the news that a client had a job — and was still getting assistance. She knew when it came to a question of money, this agency purely root-hog, or dies."

"O"

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When we first read "The Hand on the Latch" — many years ago — we took for granted that the author was American. True, the surname Cholmondeley is exceptionally British, but many Americans, especially those who can trace their ancestry back to the "Mayflower," bear typically English names. The evidence in the story itself so far outweighed the nationality suggested by the surname that we never even dreamed the author could have been an Englishwoman.

For this story, in every conceivable respect, is American. The locale is obviously Western or mid-Western — in the very first paragraph we are given the background of the snow-covered prairie and the rough-hewn log hut, and later we hear the prairie dog and coyote. The period is obviously that of the Civil War — there are references to the great conflict, to the North and South, and to a little picture of President Lincoln on the mantel-shelf. The characters? — who would question their authentic American quality? The mood? — surely the author had read and subconsciously absorbed the accents of Ambrose Bierce, that typically American writer. The dialogue? — not a syllable off key for the period and the place.

And yet this story was written more than forty years ago by an Englishwoman who, to the best of our knowledge, never even visited America!

Today Mary Cholmondeley is a "forgotten" writer. Even her most "famous" novel, RED POTTAGE, *which caused a minor literary scandal just before the turn of the century, is now as forgotten as the author herself. That she was the aunt of the novelist Stella Benson is also a fact lost in limbo. But somehow we cannot believe that Mary Cholmondeley's "The Hand on the Latch" will ever pass into complete oblivion. From time to time, so long as short stories are reprinted and so long as anthologies survive as an editorial form, "The Hand on the Latch" will make an occasional appearance in print — a voice out of the past that will not be stilled . . .*

THE HAND ON THE LATCH

by MARY CHOLMONDELEY

She stood at her low window with its uneven wavering glass, and looked out across the prairie. A little snow had fallen — not much, only enough to add a sense of desolation to the boundless plain, the infinite plain outside the four cramped walls of her log hut. The log hut was like

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a tiny boat moored in some vast, tideless, impassable sea. The immensity of the prairie had crushed her in the earlier years of her married life, but gradually she had become accustomed to it, then reconciled to it, at last almost a part of it. The gray had come early to her thick hair, a certain fixity to the quiet courage of her eyes. Her calm, steadfast face showed that she was not given to depression, but nevertheless this evening, as she stood watching for her husband's return, for the first distant speck of him where the cart rut vanished into the plain, a sense of impending misfortune enfolded her with the dusk. Was it because the first snow had fallen? Ah me! how much it meant. It was as significant for her as the gray pallor that falls on a sick man's face. It meant the endless winter, the greater isolation instead of the lesser, the powerlessness to move hand or foot in that all-enveloping shroud; the struggle, not for existence — with him beside her that was assured — not for luxury — she had ceased to care for it, though he had not ceased to care for her sake — but for life in any but its narrowest sense. Books, letters, human speech, through the long months these would be almost entirely denied her. The sudden remembrance of the larger needs of life flooded her soul, touching to momentary semblance of movement many things long cherished, but long since dead, like delicate sea plants beyond high-water mark that cannot exist between the long droughts when the neap tide does not come. She had known what she was doing when against the wishes of her family she of the South had married him of the North, when she left the busy city life she knew, and clave to her husband, following him over the rim of the world, as women will follow while they have feet to follow with. She was his superior in birth, cultivation, refinement, but she had never regretted what she had done. The regrets were his for her, for the poverty to which he had brought her, and to which she had not been accustomed. She had only one regret, if such a thin strip of a word as regret can be used to describe her passionate controlled desolation, immense as the prairie, because she had no child. Perhaps if they had had children the walls of the log hut in the waste might have closed in on them less rigidly. It might have become more of a home.

Her mind had taken its old mechanical bent, the trend of long habit as she looked out from that low window. How often she had stood there, and thought, "If only we might have had a child." And now by sheer force of habit she thought it yet again. And then a slow rapture took possession of her whole being, mounted, mounted till she leaned against the window-sill faint with joy. She was to have a child after all. She had hardly dared believe it at first, but as time had gone on a vague hope, quickly suppressed as unbearable, had turned to suspense, suspense had alternated with the fierce

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despair that precedes certainty. Certainty had come at last, clear and calm and exquisite as dawn. She would have a child in the spring. What was the winter to her now! Nothing but a step toward joy. The world was all broken up and made new. The prairie, its great loneliness, its deathlike solitude, were gone out of her life. She was to have a child in the spring. She had not dared to tell her husband till she was sure. But she would tell him this evening when they were sitting together over the fire.

She stood motionless in the deepening dusk, trying to be calm. And at last in the far distance she saw a speck arise, as it were, out of a crease in the level earth — her husband on his horse. How many hundreds of times she had seen him appear over the rim of the world, just as he was appearing now! She lit the lamp and put it in the window. She blew the log fire to a blaze. The firelight danced on the wooden walls, crowded with cheap pictures, and on the few precious daguerreotypes that reminded her she too had brothers and sisters and kin of her own, far away in one of those southern cities where the war was still smouldering grimly on.

Her husband took his horse round and stalled him. Presently he came in. They stood a moment together in silence as their custom was, and she leaned her forehead against his shoulder. Then she busied herself with his supper, and he sat down heavily at the little table.

"Had you any difficulty this time in getting the money together?" she asked.

Her husband was a tax collector.

"None," he said abstractedly, "at least — yes — a little. But I have it all, and the arrears as well. It makes a large sum."

He was evidently thinking of something else. She did not speak again. She saw something was troubling him.

"I heard news today at Phillip's," he said at last, "which I don't like. If I had heard in time, and if I could have borrowed a fresh horse, I would have ridden straight on. But it was too late in the day to be safe, and you would have been anxious what had become of me if I had been out all night with all this money on me. I shall go tomorrow as soon as it is light."

They discussed the business which took him to the nearest town thirty miles away, where their small savings were invested — somewhat precariously, as it turned out. What was safe, who was safe while the invisible war between North and South smouldered on and on? It had not come near them, but as an earthquake which is engulfing cities in one part of Europe will rattle a teacup without oversetting it on a cottage shelf half a continent away — so the Civil War had reached them at last.

"I take a hopeful view," he said, but his face was overcast. "I don't see why we should lose the little we have. It has been hard enough to scrape it together, God knows. Promptitude and joint action with Reynolds will

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probably save it. But I must be prompt." He still spoke abstractedly, as if even now he were thinking of something else.

He began to take out of the leathern satchel various bags of money.

"Shall I help you to count it?"

She often did so.

They counted the flimsy dirty paper money together, and put it all back into the various labeled bags.

"It comes right," he said.

Suddenly she said, "But you can't pay it into the bank tomorrow if you go on to —"

"I know," he said, looking at her; "that is what I have been thinking of ever since I heard Phillip's news. I don't like leaving you with all this money in the house, but I must."

She was silent. She was not frightened for herself, but it was state money, not their own. She was not nervous as he was, but she had always shared with him a certain dread of those bulging bags, and had always been thankful to see him return safe — he never went twice by the same track — after paying the money in. In those wild days when men went armed with their lives in their hands, it was not well to be known to have large sums about you.

He looked at the bags, frowning.

"I am not afraid," she said.

"There is no real need to be," he said after a moment. "When I leave tomorrow morning it will be thought I have gone to pay it in. Still —"

He did not finish his sentence, but she knew what was in his mind: the great loneliness of the prairie. Out in the white night came the short, sharp yap of a wolf.

"I am not afraid," she said again.

"I shall only be gone one night," he said.

"I have often been a night alone."

"I know," he said, "but somehow it's worse leaving you with so much money in the house."

"No one knows it will be here."

"That is true," he said, "except that everyone knows I have been collecting large sums."

"They will think you have gone to pay it in as usual."

"Yes," he said with an effort.

Then he got up, and went to his tool box. She watched him open it, seeing him in a new light, which encompassed him with even greater love. "If I tell him tonight," she thought, "it will make him even more anxious about leaving me. Perhaps he would refuse to go, and he must go. I will not tell him till he comes back."

The resolution not to speak was like taking hold of a piece of iron in frost. She had not known it would hurt so much. A new tremulousness, sweet and strange, passed over her — not cowardice, not fear, not of the heart nor of the mind, but a sort of emotion of the whole being.

"I will not tell him," she said again.

Her husband got out his tools, took up a plank from the floor, and put the money into a hole beneath it, beside their small valuables, such as they were, in a biscuit tin. Then he replaced the plank, screwed it down,

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and she drew back a small fur mat over the place. He put away the tools and then came and stood in front of her. He was not conscious of her transfiguration, and she dropped her eyes for fear of showing it.

"I shall start early," he said, "as soon as it is light, and I shall be back before sundown the day after tomorrow. I know it is unreasonable, but I shall go easier in my mind if you will promise me one thing."

"What is it?"

"Not to go out of the house, or to let anyone else come in on any pretense whatever, while I am away," he said. "Bar everything, and stay inside."

"I shan't want to go out."

He made an impatient movement.

"Promise me that come what will you will let no one in during my absence," he said.

"I promise."

"Swear it."

She hesitated.

"Swear it to please me," he said.

"I swear that I will let no one into the house, on any pretext whatever, until you come back," she said, smiling at him.

He sighed and relapsed into his chair, and gave way to the great fatigue that possessed him.

The next morning he started soon after daybreak, but not until he had brought her in sufficient fuel to last several days. There had been more snow in the night, fine snow like salt, but not enough to make traveling difficult. She watched him ride away, and silenced the voice within her which always said as she saw him go, "You will never see him again, you have heard his voice for the last time." Perhaps, after all, the difference between the brave and the cowardly lies in how they deal with that voice. Both hear it. She silenced it instantly. It spoke again, more insistently: "You have heard his voice, felt his kiss, for the last time. He will never see the face of his child." She silenced it again, and went about her work.

The day passed as countless other days had passed. She was accustomed to be much alone. She had work to do, enough and to spare, within the little home which was to become a real home, please God, in the spring. The evening fell almost before she expected it. She locked and barred the doors, and closed the shutters of the windows. She made all secure, as she had done many a time before.

A wandering wind had arisen at nightfall, and it came softly across the snow and tried the doors and windows as with a furtive hand. She could hear it coming as from an immense distance, passing with a sigh, returning plaintive, homeless, forlorn, to whisper round the house.

How like the sound of the wind was to wandering footsteps, slowly drawing near, creeping round the house. She could almost have fancied that a hand touched the shutters, was even now trying to raise the latch of the door.

A moment of intense silence, in which the wind seemed to hold its

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breath and listen without, while she listened within, and then a low, distinct knock upon the door.

She did not move.

"It is the wind," she said to herself; but she knew it was not.

The knock came again, low, urgent, not to be denied.

She had become very cold. She had supposed fear was an emotion of the mind. She had not reckoned for this slow paralysis of the body.

She managed to creep to the window and unbar the shutter an inch or two. By pressing her face against the extreme corner of the pane she could just discern in the snow-light part of a man's figure, wrapped in a long cloak.

She barred the window once more. She was not surprised. She knew now that she had known it always. She had pretended to herself that the thief would not come; but she was expecting him when he knocked. And he stood there, outside. Presently he would be inside.

He knocked yet again, this time more loudly. What need was there for silence when for miles and miles round there was no ear to hear save that of a chance prairie dog?

She laid hold upon her courage, seeing that it was her only refuge, and went to the door.

"Who is there?" she said through a chink.

A man's voice, low and feeble, replied, "Let me in."

"I cannot let you in."

There was a short silence.

"I pray you let me in," he said.

"I have told you I cannot. Who are you?"

"I am a soldier, wounded. I'm trying to get back to my friends." He mentioned a settlement about fifty miles north. "I have missed my way, and I can't drag myself any farther."

Her heart swung violently between suspicion and compassion.

"I am alone in the house," she said. "My husband is away, and he made me promise not to let anyone in during his absence."

"Then I shall die on your doorstep," said the voice. "I can't drag myself any farther."

There was another silence.

"It is beginning to snow," he said.

"I know," she said; and he heard the trouble in her voice.

"Open the door and look at me," he said, "and see if I can do you any harm."

She opened the door and stood on the threshold, barring the way. He was leaning against the doorpost with his head against it, as she had often seen her husband lean when he was talking to her on a summer evening. Something in his attitude, so like her husband's, touched her strangely. Supposing he were in need, and pleaded for help in vain!

The man turned his face toward her. It was sunk and hollow, ravaged with pain, an evil-looking face. His right arm was in a sling under his tattered military cloak. He seemed to have made his final effort, and now stood staring dumbly at her.

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"My husband will never forgive me," she said with a sort of sob.

He said nothing more. He seemed at the last point of exhaustion. Through the dim white night a few flakes of snow fell upon his harsh, repellent face and on his bandaged arm.

A sudden wave of pity carried all before it.

She beckoned him into the house, and locked and barred the door. She put him in her husband's chair by the fire. He hardly noticed anything. He seemed stupefied. He sat staring alternately at the fire and at her. When she asked him to what regiment he belonged he did not answer.

She set before him the supper she had prepared for herself, and chafed his hard, emaciated dirty hand till the warmth returned to it. Then he ate, with difficulty at first, then with slow voracity, all she had put before him.

A semblance of life returned gradually to him.

"I was pretty near done up when I knocked," he said.

She dressed his wound, which did not appear very deep, wrapped it in fresh bandages, and readjusted his sling. He took it all as a matter of course.

She made up a little bed of rugs and blankets for him in the back kitchen. When she came back to the living room she found he had dragged himself to his feet, and was looking vacantly at a little picture of President Lincoln on the mantel-shelf. She showed him the bed and told him to lie down on it. He obeyed her implicitly, like a child. She left him, and presently heard him cast himself down. A few minutes later she went to the door and listened. His heavy, regular breathing told her he was asleep.

She went back to the kitchen and sat down by the fire.

Was he really asleep? Was it all feigned — the wound, the story, the exhaustion? Had she been trapped? Oh! what had she done?

She seemed like two people. One self, silent, alert, experienced, fearless, knew that she had allowed herself to be deluded in spite of being warned, knew that her feelings had been played upon, made use of, not even dexterously made use of; knew that she had disobeyed her husband, broken her solemn oath to him, plunged him with herself into disgrace if the money were stolen. And in the eyes of that self it was already stolen. It was still under the plank beneath her feet, but it was already stolen.

The other self, tremulous, inconsequent, full of irresistible tenderness for suffering and weakness even in its uncouthest garb, said incessantly:

"I could do no less. If I die for it, still I could do no less. Somebody brought him into the world. Some woman cried for joy and anguish when he was born. He would have died if I had not taken him in. I could do no less."

Through the long hours she sat by

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the fire, unable to reconcile herself to going upstairs to her own room and to bed.

Once she got up and noiselessly took down her husband's revolver from the mantel-shelf and examined it. He had taken its fellow with him, and apparently contrary to his custom he had taken the powder flask with him too, for it was gone from its nail. The revolvers were always kept loaded, but — by some evil chance the one that remained was unloaded. She could have sworn she had seen her husband load it two days ago. Why was this numbness creeping over her again? She got out powder and bullets from a small store she had of her own, loaded and primed it, and laid it on the table beside her.

The night had become very still. Her hearing seemed to reach out till she felt she could have heard a coyote move in its hole miles away. The log fire creaked and shifted. The tall clock in the corner ticked, catching its chain now and then, as its manner was. The wooden walls shrunk and groaned a little. The small home-like sounds only accentuated the enormous silence without. Suddenly in the midst of them a real sound fell upon her ear; very low but different, not like the fragmentary inadvertent murmur of the hut; a small, purposeful, stealthy sound, aware of itself. She listened as she had listened before, without moving. It was not louder than the whittling of a mouse behind the wainscot, hardly louder than the scraping of a mole's thin hand in the soil. It continued. Then it stopped. It was only her foolish fancy, after all. There it was again. Where did it come from?

The man in the next room?

She took up the lamp and crept down the narrow passage to the door of the back kitchen. His loud, even breathing sounded distinctly through the crannies of the ill-fitting door. Surely it was overloud. She listened to it. She could hear nothing else. Was his breathing a pretense? She opened the door noiselessly, and went in, shading the light with her hand.

She bent over the sleeping man. At the first glance her heart sank, for he had not taken off his boots. But as she looked hard at him her suspicions died within her. He lay on his back, with his coarse, emaciated face toward her, his mouth open, showing his broken teeth. The sleep of utter exhaustion was upon him. She could have killed him as he lay. He was not acting. He was really asleep.

She crept out of the room again, leaving the door ajar, and went back to the kitchen.

Hardly had she sat down when she heard the sound again. It was too faint to reach her except when she was in the kitchen. She knew now where it came from — *the door*. Someone was picking the lock.

The instant the sleeping man was out of her sight she suspected him again.

Was he really asleep, after all? He had not taken off his boots. When she came back from making his bed she

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had found him standing by the mantel-shelf. Had he unloaded the pistol in her absence? Would he presently get up, and open the door to his confederates?

Her mind rose clear and cold and unflinching. She took up the pistol, and then laid it down again. She wanted a more noiseless weapon. She got out her husband's great clasp-knife from the open tool box, took the lamp, and crept back to the man's bedside. She should be able to kill him. Certainly she should be able to kill him; and then she should have the pistol for the other one.

But he still slept heavily. When she saw him again, again her suspicions fell from her. She *knew* he was asleep.

She shook him by the shoulder, noiselessly, but with increasing violence, until he opened his eyes with a groan. Then only she remembered that she was shaking his wounded arm. He saw the knife in her hand, and raised his left arm as if to ward off the blow.

"Listen," she whispered, close to his ear. "Don't speak. There is a man trying to break into the house. You must get up and help me."

He stared at her, vaguely at first, but with growing intelligence. The food and sleep had restored him somewhat to himself. He sat up on the couch.

"Take off my boots," he whispered; "I tried and could not."

Her last suspicion of him vanished. She cut the laces with her knife, and dragged his boots off. They stuck to his feet, and bits of the woolen socks came off with them. They had evidently not been taken off for weeks. While she did it he whispered, "Why should anyone be wanting to break in? There's nothing here to take."

"Yes, there is," she said. "There's a lot of money."

"Good Lord! Where?"

"Under the floor in the kitchen."

"Are there many of 'em?"

"I don't know."

"Well, we shall know soon enough," said the man. He had become alert, keen. "Have you any pistols?"

"Yes, one."

"Fetch it, but don't make a sound, mind."

She stole away, and returned with the pistol. She would have put it into his hand, but he pushed it away.

"It's no use to me," he said, "with my arm in a sling. I will see what I can do with my left hand and the knife. Can you shoot?"

"Yes."

"Can you hit anything?"

"Yes."

"To be depended on?"

"Yes."

"Well, it's darned lucky. How long will that door hold?"

They were both in the little passage by now, pressed close together, listening to the furtive pick, pick of someone at the lock.

"I don't think it will hold more than a minute."

"Now, look here," he said, "I shall go and stand at the foot of the stair, and knife the second man, if there is a

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second. The first man I'll leave to you. There's a bit of light outside from the snow. He'll let in enough light to see him by as he opens the door. Don't wait. Fire at him as he comes in, and don't stop; go on firing at him till he drops. You've got six bullets. Don't you make any mistake and shoot me. I've had enough of that already. Now you look carefully where I'm going to stand, and when I'm there you put out the lamp."

He spoke to her as a man does to his comrade.

That she could be frightened did not seem to enter his calculations. He moved with catlike stealth to the foot of the tiny staircase and flattened himself against the wall. Then he stretched his left arm once or twice as if to make sure of it, licked the haft of the knife, and nodded at her.

She instantly put out the lamp.

All was dark save for a faint thread of light which outlined the door. Across the thread something moved once — twice. The sound of picking ceased. Then another sound succeeded it, a new one, unlike the last, as if something were being gently prised open, wrenched.

"The bar will hold," she said to herself, and then remembered for the first time that the rung into which the bar slid had been loose these many days. It was giving now.

It had given!

The door opened silently, and a man came in.

For a moment she saw him clear, with the accomplice snow-light behind him. She did not hesitate. She shot once and again. He fell and struggled violently up, and she shot again. He fell and dragged himself to his knees, and she shot again. Then he sank gently and slowly down as if tired, with his face against the wall, and moved no more.

The man on the stairs rushed out and looked through the open door.

"By George, he was single-handed!" he said.

Then he stooped over the prostrate man and turned him over on his back.

"Dead!" he said, chuckling. "Well done, Missus! — stone dead!"

He was masked.

The dirty left hand tore the mask callously off the gray face.

The woman had drawn near and looked over his shoulder.

"Do you know him?" said the man.

For a moment she did not answer, and the pistol which had done its work so well dropped noisily out of her palsied hand.

"He is a stranger to me," she said, looking fixedly at her husband's fading face.

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EVIDENCE EX CAMERA

Margery Allingham remembers clearly the circumstances under which "Evidence in Camera" was born. There were (a) the place; (b) the people; (c) the props — and (d) the put-together-er . . . The original idea sprang into her head in a railway train (a). She was traveling to London in an overcrowded railway carriage — the English train, Miss Allingham reminds us, is a series of little compartments, like the cartridge wallets on the shoulder belt of what Miss Allingham calls the "War of Independence" uniform. She found herself so wedged in among elbows, handbags, and the more intimate sections of her fellow travelers (b) that she could scarcely move her head. She was sitting on something — to this day she does not know what, although it was certainly alive, at least in the beginning of the trip. At any rate, all Miss Allingham could see was someone's limp gray vest, which quivered not more than six inches from her nose. Across the vest hung a silver chain from which various small objects (c) depended — four medals, a disc which proclaimed the wearer to be a "Tail Wagger," a tiny metal tassel — all oscillating hypnotically before Miss Allingham's eyes as the train (a) rocked toward London.

On Miss Allingham's knee rested a copy of the Medico-Legal Society's quarterly report (c), containing an article on "Psychiatry and Degrees of Murder." Miss Allingham was in need of a short-story plot and had intended to read the article during the railway journey, in the hope of picking up a psychological gimmick. But the Medico-Legal journal remained unopened and unread. Instead, to occupy her thoughts, were (a) the sardine-packed scene, (b) the helter-skelter dramatis personæ, and (c) the swinging, swaying silver string.

And then came the catalyst (d). Just before the train arrived at its London terminus, which is dark and sooty and approached by many bridges, Miss Allingham, from her cramped and uncomfortable position, heard someone in the compartment say, softly but distinctly: "You ought to get that watch photographed."

She saw neither the speaker nor the person addressed, but the words themselves were so odd, so cryptic, so elusively difficult to pin a meaning to — well, they took hold of her imagination and they held on with a bloodhound grip.

As a matter of fact, Miss Allingham simply had to write a story combining (a) the train, (b) the occupants of the railway carriage, and (c) the

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chain "charms" — simply to free herself from the haunting image of (d) a watch that had to be photographed. And as a matter of further fact, the essential plot worked itself out in her mind by the time a taxicab bounced her from the railway terminus to her London flat.

Thus was born Chippy Wager, the camera criminologist, the photographic private-eye — a hands-across-the-sea blood-brother to George Harmon Coxe's Flashgun Casey, Crime Photographer.

EVIDENCE IN CAMERA

by MARGERY ALLINGHAM

THERE are people who might consider Chippy Wager unethical, and others who go a great deal further. At the time I am telling you about, he was on the *Cormorant*, which is not that paper's real name, but why make enemies if you don't have to? He was, and still is of course, a photographer — one of those boys who shoot through a cop's legs and jump onto the running-board of the limousine so that you can see the Society bride in tears as she takes her first cold look at the man she's got. They pay those lads plenty, but Chippy had uses for money, mainly liquid, and he made another income on the side by taking photographs privately of practically everything from the Mayor and Corporation to the local beauty queen. He made time for these activities when there was none, and used the *Cormorant's* excellent equipment, but, as he said, he had to drink.

We both went down to St. Piers for the fifth murder. I was on the old *Post* at the time, and when I say "we" went, I mean among others. The Southern Railway put on one excursion train for the Press and another for the police when the body of Mrs. Lily Clarke was found.

The story was simple and, if you like that sort of thing, good. You probably remember it. It rated about as much space as an election and by the time the body of the fifth victim, Mrs. Lily Clarke, was found at St. Piers, it was practically the one subject of conversation in the bars. Briefly, someone was killing off middle-aged redheads in seaside towns. There had been a summer of it. In May Mrs. Wild was killed in Whichborne, in June Mrs. Garrard at Turnhill Bay, and by July the murderer had got round to Southwharf and had attended to a Mrs. Jelf. In August he chose a fashionable resort and strangled Mrs. Ginger Hollis just outside the polo ground at Prinny's Plage, and in September there was this latest affair at St. Piers.

In all five instances the details were astonishingly similar. Each victim

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was respectable, homely in appearance, in the habit of letting rooms to visitors, and either naturally or artificially auburn-haired. Each woman was found strangled in a secluded place in the open air, with her untouched handbag beside her. Each woman lost some trifling ornament, such as a cheap earring, a gold clasp from a chain bracelet, a locket containing edelweiss, and once — in Mrs. Hollis's case — a small silver button with a regimental crest on it.

Not once was any trace of the murderer seen either before or after the crime, and by the time the St. Piers news came through, the police were savage, while the press were on the verge of being bored. There was still plenty to write about but nothing new. The *Cormorant* and its sisters, who had worked themselves up to screaming hysterics in July, were showing signs of exhaustion, and even the heavies, like ourselves and the *World*, were falling back on such items as the slayer's preference for the new moon.

From my own purely personal point of view the thing was becoming a nightmare and the principal reason for that was Chippy. I had first met him when I traveled down to Whichborne in May. On that occasion there were seventeen of us in a carriage which might have held ten without active inconvenience, and although he was the last to arrive he was in a corner seat with only myself atop of him before the journey was halfway over. I do not know how he did this. My impression is that there was a jolt in a tunnel and that when we came out into the light there he was, slung with cameras, sitting just underneath me.

Chippy is a small thin rag of a man with a surprisingly large square head in which, somewhere low down in front, has been inserted the bright predatory face of an evil child. Whenever I think of him, which is as seldom as possible, I receive a mental picture of white lashes on red lids and a row of widely spaced uneven teeth bared in a "Have you got anything *I* want?" smile.

His is hardly one of the dressy professions but I have seen even his confrères blench when confronted by some of his ensembles. Peterson, my opposite number on the *World*, who interests himself in these matters, insists that the man finds his clothes lying about in hotel bedrooms. It may be so. At any rate, when I first saw him he was certainly wearing jodhpurs, carefully tailored for larger and even more curiously shaped legs, a green cardigan buttoning on the wrong side, and a new cheap sports-coat adorned by a single gigantic beer-stain. Every pocket, one frankly marsupial, bulged strangely rather than dangerously, and he carried as much gear as a paratrooper.

I remember my conversation with him on that occasion. I had pulled back my sleeve to glance at the time and he prodded me in the back.

"That's a good watch," he said. "Ever had it photographed?"

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I said that, strange as it might seem to him, such a notion had never entered my head.

"It's wise," he assured me seriously. "In case you ever have it pinched, see? Gives the busies something to go on. I'll do it for you when we get in. It won't cost you more than half a bar. You're married, of course. Got any kids?"

I told him no, and he seemed hurt.

"Kids make good pictures," he explained. "Kids and dogs. Got a dog?"

Again I had to disappoint him.

"Pity," he said. "What a pal, eh? What a pal. You might pick one up down here. There's a chap only five miles out who breeds Irish wolfhounds. I'll put you on to him and we'll take a spool. Surprise the wife, eh?"

I escaped from him as soon as I could but everything was against me. The news, what there was of it, broke late and the town was packed. By the time I realized that I should have to stay, there was no accommodation in the place. I was resigning myself to a bench on the front when I ran into Chippy just before closing time in the back bar of the Queen's. He was in the same predicament, having, so he said, had to waste time photographing a cotton magnate and his fifth wife who were having their second honeymoon in the King's Suite at the Grand. He was not worrying, however, and when they turned us out he produced an old friend who was the manager of a flea-ridden little pub in a back street. He fixed us up with two cots in an attic, for which I paid, and I let Chippy take a photograph of my watch, rewarding him, as far as I remember, with fourteen shillings and sixpence in cash for three excellent prints.

After that I was doomed. The man became an incubus, haunting me as I drank furtively in corners or hunted our murderer with one eye, so to speak, behind me lest I myself should be waylaid. I do agree with Peterson that I am free, adult, and a member of a profession which ought at least to be able to look after itself, and I could once, I suppose, have got rid of him with brutality and the fishy eye, but I could not bring myself to do it. He was so fearful, so unmitigatedly awful, that he fascinated me. Some unsuspected masochism in my nature compelled me to be at least half civil to him, and then of course he was often so infuriatingly useful. There was a rumor that he was lucky, but that explanation did him less than justice. He was indefatigable, and his curious contacts and side jobs sometimes provided him with most useful breaks, as for instance when he nipped down to Whichborne station to oblige a man who wanted a shot of his greyhound and got instead a very fine one of the Yard's Chief Inspector Tizer getting off the train at a time when no one was sure if the local police had appealed to H.Q. and, if so, who was going to be sent.

By the time the murderer had got round to St. Piers, Chippy was most

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anxious that the homicidal nut should be apprehended and the case finished. His reason was personal and typical, and I happened to know about it because he had confided it to me one night at Prinny's Plage, when he had hounded me down to a hostelry which I felt fairly confident not even he had heard of. I can see him now, pointing to the Brewers' Almanac which hung on the varnished matchboarding of the bar wall.

"Look, chum," he said, his filthy forefinger tracing out the dates, "next new moon is September sixteen, isn't it? Don't think I'm complaining about that. It'll still be summer then and the seaside suits me. But what about the month after? New moon October fourteen. I don't want anything awkward to happen then, do I?"

I made a point of never giving him encouragement and I said nothing, knowing perfectly well I should not silence him.

"October fourteen." He was indignant. "The Distillers Livery Company conference begins on the fourteenth. Fancy missing that. What a tragedy, eh? What a tragedy!"

That was in August. We were all expecting the September murder, although naturally there was no way of telling where it was going to crop up. When the news broke just too late for the edition which everybody was holding for it in a shamefaced way, it was very nearly anticlimax. As Peterson said, there would have been almost more news value in the story if it *hadn't* occurred. No one was pleased. The livelier dailies had planted men at most of the larger southern watering places but no one had thought of St. Piers, cheap and respectable, out on the mud-flats of the estuary. We had a local correspondent there, as we had in every town in the country. The last thing he had sent us, according to the book, was an account of a stork which a coachload of machine-shop operatives had seen flying inland one evening in June the previous year. According to his story, the phenomenon had caused wild excitement in the town. It appeared to be that sort of place.

I managed to avoid Chippy going down but I saw his back disappearing into the Railway Tavern as I picked up a taxi at the station. I was glad of the respite, for the newsflash which had come in was so familiar in its wording — *Body of well nurtured woman found strangled. Lonely woodland. Auburn-haired. Chief Inspector Tizer hurrying to scene* — that I felt a wave of pure nausea at the prospect of having to deal with him as well.

St. Piers was much as I had feared. At first it is only the light and the faint smell of iodine which warns the newcomer that the coast is at hand; but towards the front, where the architecture veers on Victorian Moorish, a faded ocean licks a dun-colored strand and the shops sell colored buckets and sticks of sweet rock and crested china to take home.

I found our local correspondent, a tobacconist called Cuffley, in his shop

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on the parade. He was waiting for me on the step, every hair in his mustache electrified with excitement. He had leaped to the job, had been on the spot soon after the body had been discovered, and had had a word with the inevitable small boy who had given the first alarm. He had even written a short piece which began, as I remember, *Mad Killer Visits St. Piers At Last. A baleful sun rose early this morning over the muncipally maintained woodland behind the Kursaal and must have shone down unheeding for quite a space on the ghastly blue contorted lips of a respected local resident. . . .*

However, he had got the victim's name and address for me and had written it down in block caps on the back of one of his trade cards: *MRS. LILY CLARKE, KNOLE, SEAVIEW AVENUE.* It was the same sort of name and the same sort of address as all the others in the long weary business, and when he told me with delight that he had recognized a relation of the dead woman among his customers, and had gone to the length of having her waiting for me in the little room behind the shop, I knew before I saw her exactly the kind of gal I was going to find. The sameness of all five cases was slightly unnerving. I recognized at once both her horror and the dreadful secret enjoyment she was finding in it. I had seen it often that summer.

Her story, too, was a fifth variation of a tale I had heard four times already. Like her predecessors, Mrs. Clarke had been a widow. She had not dyed her hair exactly but she *had* touched it up. She had not taken in lodgers in the ordinary way, being much too refined. But yes, on occasions she *had* obliged. The idea of her going for a walk at night with a man she did not know! Well, if the situation had not been so tragic the relation would have had to laugh, she would reelly.

I asked the question I had grown used to asking. "Was she a nice woman? Did you like her?" I was prepared for the girl's hesitation and the faint uneasiness, the anxiety to speak well of the dead. I remembered comments on the other women. "She had a temper." "You would not call her exactly generous." "She liked her own way." "She could be very nice when she wanted to."

This time Mr. Cuffley's customer, in speaking of Mrs. Clarke, said something which seemed to me to sum them all up.

"Oh, she was all for herself," she said grimly and shut her mouth like a vice.

At Sub-Divisional Police Headquarters there was no information of a startling character. Mrs. Clarke had met her death at some time before midnight and in the process she had not been robbed. Fifteen pounds in treasury notes had been found in the mock-crocodile handbag which still hung from her arm. The sergeant in charge spoke of the negligence of the criminal in this respect with an amazement which bordered upon in-

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dignation. The only blessed things she had lost, he said regretfully, was a silver tassel which had hung from the old-fashioned silver brooch she wore in her lapel — and, of course, her life.

As in all the earlier crimes there was absolutely no suspect. There were no visitors staying at Knole, Seaview Avenue, and so far no one had come forward to report having seen the woman out with a stranger.

I sent my story off and took a tram to the Kursaal. Half the town appeared to have the same idea and I joined a stream of consciously casual strollers advancing purposefully up a threadbare path between ragged ill-used trees. The body had been found in a dusty glade where cartons and little scraps of paper grew instead of anemones. The spot needed no sign-post. The police had got their screens up and I could see Inspector Tizer's hunched shoulders appearing above one of them.

The sightseers stood around at a police-prescribed distance and here again nothing was new. In the last few months reams had been written about the avid, open-mouthed defectives who had come to stare at the last couch of each of the victims, and here, as far as I could see, they all were once more. I felt certain I had seen the dreary man with the fascinated blue eyes and the watch-chain full of darts medals at every road accident, case of illness in the street, or mere surface reconstruction at which I had had the misfortune to be present. The adolescent girl with the weeping baby brother was familiar, too, and as for the plump middle-aged man with the broad smile he could not possibly have known he was wearing, I was sure I had seen him, or someone very like him, grinning at the scene of every catastrophe in my experience. They were all standing about, looking and hoping, God knew what for. One group, which contained at least one collapsible perambulator, appeared to be thinking of picnicking.

I had a word with Tizer, who was not pleased to see me and had nothing to tell me. He is never sanguine and by this time his gloom was painful. I came away feeling nearly as sorry for him as I was for myself.

The Press was there in force and I walked down the hill with Peterson. We came on Chippy at the turning where the path divides. He was busy, as usual, and appeared to be taking a photograph of a holiday trio, two plump blondes in tight slacks with a flushed lout wriggling between them. There could be only one explanation of the performance and I was gratified, if surprised, to see he had the grace not to notice me.

"Grafters and buskers on fairgrounds call it mug-faking, I believe," observed Peterson as we turned into the White Lion. "What does he charge them? Half a dollar? It's an interesting comment on the price of whiskey." Peterson has an acid little voice.

For the rest of the week the case dragged on. We had our hopes raised by several false alarms. Tizer thought

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he had a lead and went scampering to St. Leonards with a trail of us behind him, but the chase led nowhere. Everybody did what he could. The *Cormorant* tried to start a stink against the police. The tame psychiatrists wrote more articles for the Sundays. Somebody asked a question in the House and the Yard sent a second Chief Inspector down. Middle-aged women everywhere began to give themselves airs.

From our point of view it was all very dull. The weather turned cold and three of the best hotels ran out of scotch. I saw Chippy now and again but he did not worry me. He was picking up plenty of work, I gathered, and if his glazed eyes in the evenings were any guide, he appeared to find it profitable.

He had a new friend, I was interested to see. So far I have not mentioned Chippy's friends. A natural distaste and embarrassment has prevented me from enlarging on them. It is one of his major disadvantages that he always seems to discover a local drinking companion who matches, if not exceeds, the man himself in pure unpresentableness. On this occasion he had chummed up with the fat man I had seen grinning at the scene of the crime, or if it was not he it was someone like him. God knows what he was by profession — a bookmaker's tout perhaps, or a traveler in something unmentionable. I had nothing against him save that if I had seen but the soles of his feet through a grating, or the top of his hat from a bus, I should have known unerringly that he was a fellow for whom I should never have the slightest possible use. He had crumbs in the creases of his blue serge waistcoat, he dribbled his beer when he drank, his voice was hoarse and coarse, and the broad vacant grin never left his face.

Chippy went about with him most of the time and I was grateful for my release. I was agitating the office for my recall by the Saturday and should have left, I think, by the Sunday had I not made a sudden, startling discovery. Chippy was trying to avoid not only me but every other newspaperman in the town. At first I could not bring myself to believe it, but having ceased to hide from him I suddenly found I saw very little of him, and then that Sunday morning we met face to face on the steps of the Grand. In the normal way it would have been I who had become wooden-faced and evasive, and he who pursued me to insist on the morning snifter, but today he slunk from me and for the first time in my life I thought I saw him discomposed. I even stood looking after him as he shuffled off, his harness clumping round his shanks, but it was not until I was drinking with Peterson and one or two others some fifteen minutes later that the truth occurred to me. Someone had asked if Chippy had gone, since he had not seen him lately, while somebody else observed that he too had noticed a singular freshness in the atmosphere.

Peterson defended him at once with

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all that charity of his which is far more lethal than straight attack, and I stood quite still, looking at the big calendar over the bar.

Of course. I could not think why I had not realized it before. For Chippy time was growing pretty short.

I was so anxious that Peterson, whom I love like a brother and who knows me nearly as well, should not cotton to my idea that I wasted several valuable minutes in what I hope was misleading casualness before I drifted off, ostensibly to phone my wife. From that moment I hunted Chippy as he had never hunted me and it was not too easy an undertaking, since, as I have said, the place was stiff with pressmen and I was more than anxious not to raise any general hue and cry. Anything Chippy had I was willing to share, but until my wire was safely sent, not with the world.

I hunted him carefully and systematically like a peasant woman going through a shawl for a flea, and for the best part of the day I was fighting a conviction that he had vanished into air. But just before six, when I was growing desperate, I suddenly saw him, still festooned with cameras, stepping ashore from a so-called pleasure steamer which had been chugging a party round the bay for the best part of three hours. The other people looked to me like the same crowd who had tramped up to the wood behind the Kursaal the day after the body was found. The adolescent girl with the baby brother was certainly there, and so was Chippy's buddy of the moment, the man with the smile.

From that moment I do not think I lost sight of him, or them either. Shadowing them was comparatively simple. The whole party moved, it seemed by instinct, to the nearest hostelry and from there in due course they moved to the next. So it went on throughout the whole evening, when the lights first came out yellow in the autumn haze and later when they shone white against the quickening dark.

I do not know when he first became aware that I was behind him. I think it was on the second trip up the Marine Boulevard, where the bars are so thick that no serious drinking time is lost in transit. I met his eyes once and he hesitated but did not nod. He had a dreadful group round him. The man with the smile was still there and so was a little seedy man with a cap and a watch-chain, and two plump blondes in slacks. I recognized them all and none of them, if I make myself clear. After that I could feel him trying to shake me off, but he was hampered and I was, I think, a fraction more sober than he. There must have been a bar on the boat.

After a while I realized that he was going somewhere in particular, heading somewhere definitely if obliquely, like a wasp to its nest. His red eyes wandered to the clock more and more often, I noticed, and his moves from pub to pub seemed more frequent.

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Then I lost him. The party must have split. At any rate, I found myself following one of the blondes and a sailor who I felt was new to me, unless of course it was not the same blonde but another just like her. I was in the older and dirtier part of the town, and closing time, I felt with dismay, could not possibly be far off. For some time I searched in a positive panic, diving into every lighted doorway and pushing every swinging door. As far as I remember, I neglected even to drink and it may be it was that which saved me.

At any rate I came finally to a big ugly old-fashioned drinking house on a corner. It was as large and drab and inviting as a barn and in the four-ale bar, into which I first put my head, there was no one at all but a little blue-eyed seedy man wearing a flat cap and a watch-chain weighted with medals. He was sitting on a bench close to the counter, drinking a pint with the quiet absorption of one who has been doing just that for the last two hours. I glanced at him sharply but there was no way of telling if he was the same man who had been with Chippy's party. It was not that I am unobservant, but such men exist not in hundreds but in thousands in every town on or off the coast.

I turned away and would have passed on down the street, when I noticed that there was a second frontage to the building. I put my head in the first door I came to and saw Chippy's back. He was leaning on the bar, which was small and temporarily unattended, the landlord having moved farther along it to the adjoining room. At first I thought he was alone, but on coming into the room I saw his smiling friend reclining on a narrow bench which ran along the inner wall. He was still beaming, but the vacancy of his broad face was intensified, if one can say such a thing, and I knew he must have ceased long ago to hear anything Chippy was telling him. Chippy was talking. He always talks when he's drunk, not wanderingly nor thickly but with a low intensity some people find unnerving. He was in full flight now. Soft incisive words illustrated by the sharp gestures of one hand — the other, after all, was supporting him — flowed from him in a steady forceful stream.

"Trapped," he whispered to his friend's oblivion. "Trapped for life by a woman with a sniff and a soul so mean — so *mean* — so *MEAN*. . . " He turned and looked at me. "Hullo," he said.

I remember I had some idea that in that condition of his I could fool him that I'd either been there all the time or was not there at all — I forget which.

The barman bustled back, drew me a beer and waddled off again, after nodding to Chippy in a secret important way I entirely misunderstood.

"She was mean, was she?" I ventured, mumbling into my beer.

"As the devil," Chippy agreed and his red eyes wandered up to look over

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my shoulder. "Come in, son," he said softly.

A pallid youth was hesitating in the doorway and he came forward at once, a long cardboard roll held out before him like a weapon.

"Dad said you was to have these and he'd see you tomorrow."

As soon as the kid had gone, Chippy tore the paper off the roll and I could see it consisted of four or five huge blown-up prints, but he did not open them out.

The smiling man on the bench moved but did not rise. His eyes were tightly shut but he continued to grin. Chippy looked at him for some time before he suddenly turned to me.

"He's canned," he said. "Canned as a toot. I've been carting him round the whole week to have someone safe to talk to, and now look at him. Never mind. Listen to me. Got imagination?"

"Yes," I assured him flatly.

"You'll need it," he said. "Listen. He was young, a simple ordinary friendly kid like you or I were, and he came to the seaside on his holiday. Only one week's holiday in the year." He paused for the horror to sink in. "One week, and she caught him."

"His wife caught him, you say?"

"No." He lowered his voice to the intense stage-whisper again. "Her mother. The landlady. She worked it. Twisted him." He made a peculiar bending movement with his two hands. "You know, said things. Made suggestions. Forced it. He had to marry the girl. Then he had hell. Couldn't afford it. Got nagged night and day, day and night."

He leaned towards me and I was aware of every one of his squat uneven teeth.

"He grew old," he said. "He lost his job. Got another, buying old gold. Used to go round buying old gold for a little firm in the Ditch. It went on for years and years. Years and years. And more years. A long time. Then it happened. He began to see her."

"Who?" I demanded. "His wife?"

"No, no." Chippy was irritated. "She'd left him, taken all he had, sold the furniture, and scampered with another poor mug. That was years ago. No, he began to see the mother."

"Good God," I said, "and she was red-haired, I suppose?"

"Imagination," he whispered at me. "Use it. Think. He married the girl in 1912, but *this* year he began to see the mother *as she used to be!*

"He's been traveling round the coast for years, buying old gold. Everybody knows him and nobody notices him. Millions of women recognize him when he taps at their doors and very often they sell him little things. But he was ill last winter, had pleurisy, had to go into a hospital. Since he's been out he's been different. The past has come back to him. He's been remembering the tragedy of his life." He wiped his mouth and started again.

"In May he saw her. At first she looked like a woman he knew called Wild, but as they were talking her face changed and he recognized her.

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He knew just what to do. He told her he'd had a bargain he didn't feel like passing on to his firm. Said he'd got a ring cheap, and if she'd meet him he'd show it to her and maybe sell it to her for the same money he paid for it."

"And when he got her alone he killed her?" I whispered.

"Yes." Chippy's voice held an echoed satisfaction. "Paid her out at last. He went off happy as an old king and felt freed and contented and satisfied until June, when he went to Turnhill Bay and knocked all unsuspecting at a door in a back street and — *saw her again.*"

It was at this precise moment that the smiling drunk on the bench opened his eyes and sat straight up abruptly, as drunks do, and then with a spurt set out at a shambling trot for the door. He hit the opening with a couple of inches to spare and was sucked up by the night. I yelled at Chippy and started after him, pausing on the threshold to glance back. Chippy leaned there against the bar, looking at me with fishlike unintelligence.

I looked over my shoulder and saw Chief Inspector Tizer and the local Super, together with a couple of satellites, slip quietly across the road and come into the bar.

Then Chippy stood at the bar with Tizer on one side of him and the local man on the other. The five blown-up prints were spread out on the wood and everyone was so engrossed in them that I came back.

They were five three-quarter length portraits of the same man. Each one had been taken out of doors in a gaping crowd, and on each print a mid-section was heavily circled with process-white. In every case, within the circle was a watch-chain hung with darts medals and other small decorations, which might easily have been overlooked had not attention thus been called to them. In the first portrait the watch-chain carried two medals and a cheap silver earring In the second, a gold clasp from a chain-bracelet had been added. In the third, a small locket. In the fourth, a silver button with a crest on it. And in the fifth there hung beside the rest an ugly little tassel from an old-fashioned brooch.

"You're trying to tell me you only noticed this yesterday and you had the astounding luck to find the earlier photographs in your file?" Tizer said.

"I *am* lucky," Chippy said, "and observant." He glanced at the bartender. "Ready, George?"

"Yes, he's still there, Mr. Wager."

The police moved forward in a body. Chippy turned to me.

"Poor little blob," he said. "He's quite happy now, you see, till the next new moon."

"When you will be otherwise engaged, I seem to remember," I said.

He glanced at me with a sudden smile and adjusted his camera.

"That's right," he said. "There's sympathy in this business, but no sentiment. Wait just a minute while I get the arrest."

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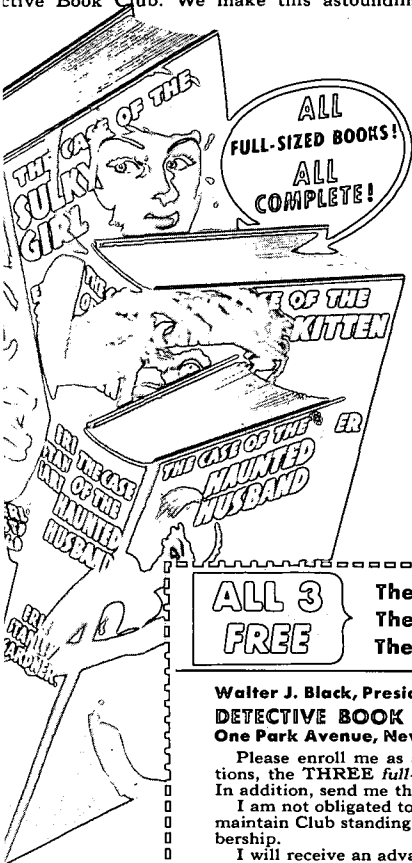

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